

HARRY POTTER AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE

J. K. ROWLING

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AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE



BY
J.K. ROWLING

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*TO PETER ROWLING,
IN MEMORY OF MR. RIDLEY
AND TO SUSAN SLADDEN,
WHO HELPED HARRY
OUT OF HIS CUPBOARD*

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CHAPTER ONE



THE RIDDLE HOUSE

The villagers of Little Hangleton still called it “the Riddle House,” even though it had been many years since the Riddle family had lived there. It stood on a hill overlooking the village, some of its windows boarded, tiles missing from its roof, and ivy spreading unchecked over its face. Once a fine-looking manor, and easily the largest and grandest building for miles around, the Riddle House was now damp, derelict, and unoccupied.

The Little Hangletons all agreed that the old house was “creepy.” Half a century ago, something strange and horrible had happened there, something that the older inhabitants of the village still liked to

discuss when topics for gossip were scarce. The story had been picked over so many times, and had been embroidered in so many places, that nobody was quite sure what the truth was anymore. Every version of the tale, however, started in the same place: Fifty years before, at daybreak on a fine summer's morning, when the Riddle House had still been well kept and impressive, a maid had entered the drawing room to find all three Riddles dead.

The maid had run screaming down the hill into the village and roused as many people as she could.

“Lying there with their eyes wide open! Cold as ice! Still in their dinner things!”

The police were summoned, and the whole of Little Hangleton had seethed with shocked curiosity and ill-disguised excitement. Nobody wasted their breath pretending to feel very sad about the Riddles, for they had been most unpopular. Elderly Mr. and Mrs. Riddle had been rich, snobbish, and rude, and their grown-up son, Tom, had been, if anything, worse. All the villagers cared about was the identity of their murderer — for plainly, three apparently healthy people did not all drop dead of natural causes on the same night.

The Hanged Man, the village pub, did a roaring trade that night; the whole village seemed to have turned out to discuss the murders. They were rewarded for leaving their firesides when the Riddles' cook arrived dramatically in their midst and announced to the suddenly silent pub that a man called Frank Bryce had just been arrested.

“Frank!” cried several people. “Never!”

Frank Bryce was the Riddles' gardener. He lived alone in a run-down cottage on the grounds of the Riddle House. Frank had come

back from the war with a very stiff leg and a great dislike of crowds and loud noises, and had been working for the Riddles ever since.

There was a rush to buy the cook drinks and hear more details.

“Always thought he was odd,” she told the eagerly listening villagers, after her fourth sherry. “Unfriendly, like. I’m sure if I’ve offered him a cuppa once, I’ve offered it a hundred times. Never wanted to mix, he didn’t.”

“Ah, now,” said a woman at the bar, “he had a hard war, Frank. He likes the quiet life. That’s no reason to —”

“Who else had a key to the back door, then?” barked the cook. “There’s been a spare key hanging in the gardener’s cottage far back as I can remember! Nobody forced the door last night! No broken windows! All Frank had to do was creep up to the big house while we was all sleeping. . . .”

The villagers exchanged dark looks.

“I always thought he had a nasty look about him, right enough,” grunted a man at the bar.

“War turned him funny, if you ask me,” said the landlord.

“Told you I wouldn’t like to get on the wrong side of Frank, didn’t I, Dot?” said an excited woman in the corner.

“Horrible temper,” said Dot, nodding fervently. “I remember, when he was a kid . . .”

By the following morning, hardly anyone in Little Hangleton doubted that Frank Bryce had killed the Riddles.

But over in the neighboring town of Great Hangleton, in the dark and dingy police station, Frank was stubbornly repeating, again and again, that he was innocent, and that the only person he had seen near

the house on the day of the Riddles' deaths had been a teenage boy, a stranger, dark-haired and pale. Nobody else in the village had seen any such boy, and the police were quite sure that Frank had invented him.

Then, just when things were looking very serious for Frank, the report on the Riddles' bodies came back and changed everything.

The police had never read an odder report. A team of doctors had examined the bodies and had concluded that none of the Riddles had been poisoned, stabbed, shot, strangled, suffocated, or (as far as they could tell) harmed at all. In fact (the report continued, in a tone of unmistakable bewilderment), the Riddles all appeared to be in perfect health — apart from the fact that they were all dead. The doctors did note (as though determined to find something wrong with the bodies) that each of the Riddles had a look of terror upon his or her face — but as the frustrated police said, whoever heard of three people being *frightened* to death?

As there was no proof that the Riddles had been murdered at all, the police were forced to let Frank go. The Riddles were buried in the Little Hangleton churchyard, and their graves remained objects of curiosity for a while. To everyone's surprise, and amid a cloud of suspicion, Frank Bryce returned to his cottage on the grounds of the Riddle House.

“‘S far as I’m concerned, he killed them, and I don’t care what the police say,” said Dot in the Hanged Man. “And if he had any decency, he’d leave here, knowing as how we knows he did it.”

But Frank did not leave. He stayed to tend the garden for the next family who lived in the Riddle House, and then the next — for

neither family stayed long. Perhaps it was partly because of Frank that the new owners said there was a nasty feeling about the place, which, in the absence of inhabitants, started to fall into disrepair.

The wealthy man who owned the Riddle House these days neither lived there nor put it to any use; they said in the village that he kept it for “tax reasons,” though nobody was very clear what these might be. The wealthy owner continued to pay Frank to do the gardening, however. Frank was nearing his seventy-seventh birthday now, very deaf, his bad leg stiffer than ever, but could be seen pottering around the flower beds in fine weather, even though the weeds were starting to creep up on him, try as he might to suppress them.

Weeds were not the only things Frank had to contend with either. Boys from the village made a habit of throwing stones through the windows of the Riddle House. They rode their bicycles over the lawns Frank worked so hard to keep smooth. Once or twice, they broke into the old house for a dare. They knew that old Frank’s devotion to the house and grounds amounted almost to an obsession, and it amused them to see him limping across the garden, brandishing his stick and yelling croakily at them. Frank, for his part, believed the boys tormented him because they, like their parents and grandparents, thought him a murderer. So when Frank awoke one night in August and saw something very odd up at the old house, he merely assumed that the boys had gone one step further in their attempts to punish him.

It was Frank’s bad leg that woke him; it was paining him worse than ever in his old age. He got up and limped downstairs into the kitchen with the idea of refilling his hot-water bottle to ease the stiffness in his knee. Standing at the sink, filling the kettle, he looked

up at the Riddle House and saw lights glimmering in its upper windows. Frank knew at once what was going on. The boys had broken into the house again, and judging by the flickering quality of the light, they had started a fire.

Frank had no telephone, and in any case, he had deeply mistrusted the police ever since they had taken him in for questioning about the Riddles' deaths. He put down the kettle at once, hurried back upstairs as fast as his bad leg would allow, and was soon back in his kitchen, fully dressed and removing a rusty old key from its hook by the door. He picked up his walking stick, which was propped against the wall, and set off into the night.

The front door of the Riddle House bore no sign of being forced, nor did any of the windows. Frank limped around to the back of the house until he reached a door almost completely hidden by ivy, took out the old key, put it into the lock, and opened the door noiselessly.

He let himself into the cavernous kitchen. Frank had not entered it for many years; nevertheless, although it was very dark, he remembered where the door into the hall was, and he groped his way toward it, his nostrils full of the smell of decay, ears pricked for any sound of footsteps or voices from overhead. He reached the hall, which was a little lighter owing to the large mullioned windows on either side of the front door, and started to climb the stairs, blessing the dust that lay thick upon the stone, because it muffled the sound of his feet and stick.

On the landing, Frank turned right, and saw at once where the intruders were: At the very end of the passage a door stood ajar, and a flickering light shone through the gap, casting a long sliver of gold

across the black floor. Frank edged closer and closer, grasping his walking stick firmly. Several feet from the entrance, he was able to see a narrow slice of the room beyond.

The fire, he now saw, had been lit in the grate. This surprised him. Then he stopped moving and listened intently, for a man's voice spoke within the room; it sounded timid and fearful.

"There is a little more in the bottle, my Lord, if you are still hungry."

"Later," said a second voice. This too belonged to a man — but it was strangely high-pitched, and cold as a sudden blast of icy wind. Something about that voice made the sparse hairs on the back of Frank's neck stand up. "Move me closer to the fire, Wormtail."

Frank turned his right ear toward the door, the better to hear. There came the clink of a bottle being put down upon some hard surface, and then the dull scraping noise of a heavy chair being dragged across the floor. Frank caught a glimpse of a small man, his back to the door, pushing the chair into place. He was wearing a long black cloak, and there was a bald patch at the back of his head. Then he went out of sight again.

"Where is Nagini?" said the cold voice.

"I — I don't know, my Lord," said the first voice nervously. "She set out to explore the house, I think. . . ."

"You will milk her before we retire, Wormtail," said the second voice. "I will need feeding in the night. The journey has tired me greatly."

Brow furrowed, Frank inclined his good ear still closer to the door, listening very hard. There was a pause, and then the man called

Wormtail spoke again.

“My Lord, may I ask how long we are going to stay here?”

“A week,” said the cold voice. “Perhaps longer. The place is moderately comfortable, and the plan cannot proceed yet. It would be foolish to act before the Quidditch World Cup is over.”

Frank inserted a gnarled finger into his ear and rotated it. Owing, no doubt, to a buildup of earwax, he had heard the word “Quidditch,” which was not a word at all.

“The — the Quidditch World Cup, my Lord?” said Wormtail. (Frank dug his finger still more vigorously into his ear.) “Forgive me, but — I do not understand — why should we wait until the World Cup is over?”

“Because, fool, at this very moment wizards are pouring into the country from all over the world, and every meddler from the Ministry of Magic will be on duty, on the watch for signs of unusual activity, checking and double-checking identities. They will be obsessed with security, lest the Muggles notice anything. So we wait.”

Frank stopped trying to clear out his ear. He had distinctly heard the words “Ministry of Magic,” “wizards,” and “Muggles.” Plainly, each of these expressions meant something secret, and Frank could think of only two sorts of people who would speak in code: spies and criminals. Frank tightened his hold on his walking stick once more, and listened more closely still.

“Your Lordship is still determined, then?” Wormtail said quietly.

“Certainly I am determined, Wormtail.” There was a note of menace in the cold voice now.

A slight pause followed — and then Wormtail spoke, the words

tumbling from him in a rush, as though he was forcing himself to say this before he lost his nerve.

“It could be done without Harry Potter, my Lord.”

Another pause, more protracted, and then —

“Without Harry Potter?” breathed the second voice softly. “I see . . .”

“My Lord, I do not say this out of concern for the boy!” said Wormtail, his voice rising squeakily. “The boy is nothing to me, nothing at all! It is merely that if we were to use another witch or wizard — any wizard — the thing could be done so much more quickly! If you allowed me to leave you for a short while — you know that I can disguise myself most effectively — I could be back here in as little as two days with a suitable person —”

“I could use another wizard,” said the cold voice softly, “that is true. . . .”

“My Lord, it makes sense,” said Wormtail, sounding thoroughly relieved now. “Laying hands on Harry Potter would be so difficult, he is so well protected —”

“And so you volunteer to go and fetch me a substitute? I wonder . . . perhaps the task of nursing me has become wearisome for you, Wormtail? Could this suggestion of abandoning the plan be nothing more than an attempt to desert me?”

“My Lord! I — I have no wish to leave you, none at all —”

“Do not lie to me!” hissed the second voice. “I can always tell, Wormtail! You are regretting that you ever returned to me. I revolt you. I see you flinch when you look at me, feel you shudder when you touch me. . . .”

“No! My devotion to Your Lordship —”

“Your devotion is nothing more than cowardice. You would not be here if you had anywhere else to go. How am I to survive without you, when I need feeding every few hours? Who is to milk Nagini?”

“But you seem so much stronger, my Lord —”

“Liar,” breathed the second voice. “I am no stronger, and a few days alone would be enough to rob me of the little health I have regained under your clumsy care. *Silence!*”

Wormtail, who had been sputtering incoherently, fell silent at once. For a few seconds, Frank could hear nothing but the fire crackling. Then the second man spoke once more, in a whisper that was almost a hiss.

“I have my reasons for using the boy, as I have already explained to you, and I will use no other. I have waited thirteen years. A few more months will make no difference. As for the protection surrounding the boy, I believe my plan will be effective. All that is needed is a little courage from you, Wormtail — courage you will find, unless you wish to feel the full extent of Lord Voldemort’s wrath —”

“My Lord, I must speak!” said Wormtail, panic in his voice now. “All through our journey I have gone over the plan in my head — my Lord, Bertha Jorkins’s disappearance will not go unnoticed for long, and if we proceed, if I murder —”

“If?” whispered the second voice. “*If?* If you follow the plan, Wormtail, the Ministry need never know that anyone else has died. You will do it quietly and without fuss; I only wish that I could do it myself, but in my present condition . . . Come, Wormtail, one more

death and our path to Harry Potter is clear. I am not asking you to do it alone. By that time, my *faithful* servant will have rejoined us —”

“I am a faithful servant,” said Wormtail, the merest trace of sullenness in his voice.

“Wormtail, I need somebody with brains, somebody whose loyalty has never wavered, and you, unfortunately, fulfill neither requirement.”

“I found you,” said Wormtail, and there was definitely a sulky edge to his voice now. “I was the one who found you. I brought you Bertha Jorkins.”

“That is true,” said the second man, sounding amused. “A stroke of brilliance I would not have thought possible from you, Wormtail — though, if truth be told, you were not aware how useful she would be when you caught her, were you?”

“I — I thought she might be useful, my Lord —”

“Liar,” said the second voice again, the cruel amusement more pronounced than ever. “However, I do not deny that her information was invaluable. Without it, I could never have formed our plan, and for that, you will have your reward, Wormtail. I will allow you to perform an essential task for me, one that many of my followers would give their right hands to perform . . .”

“R-really, my Lord? What — ?” Wormtail sounded terrified again.

“Ah, Wormtail, you don’t want me to spoil the surprise? Your part will come at the very end . . . but I promise you, you will have the honor of being just as useful as Bertha Jorkins.”

“You . . . you . . .” Wormtail’s voice suddenly sounded hoarse, as though his mouth had gone very dry. “You . . . are going . . . to kill me

too?”

“Wormtail, Wormtail,” said the cold voice silkily, “why would I kill you? I killed Bertha because I had to. She was fit for nothing after my questioning, quite useless. In any case, awkward questions would have been asked if she had gone back to the Ministry with the news that she had met you on her holidays. Wizards who are supposed to be dead would do well not to run into Ministry of Magic witches at wayside inns. . . .”

Wormtail muttered something so quietly that Frank could not hear it, but it made the second man laugh — an entirely mirthless laugh, cold as his speech.

“*We could have modified her memory?* But Memory Charms can be broken by a powerful wizard, as I proved when I questioned her. It would be an insult to her *memory* not to use the information I extracted from her, Wormtail.”

Out in the corridor, Frank suddenly became aware that the hand gripping his walking stick was slippery with sweat. The man with the cold voice had killed a woman. He was talking about it without any kind of remorse — with *amusement*. He was dangerous — a madman. And he was planning more murders — this boy, Harry Potter, whoever he was — was in danger —

Frank knew what he must do. Now, if ever, was the time to go to the police. He would creep out of the house and head straight for the telephone box in the village . . . but the cold voice was speaking again, and Frank remained where he was, frozen to the spot, listening with all his might.

“One more murder . . . my faithful servant at Hogwarts . . . Harry

Potter is as good as mine, Wormtail. It is decided. There will be no more argument. But quiet . . . I think I hear Nagini. . . .”

And the second man’s voice changed. He started making noises such as Frank had never heard before; he was hissing and spitting without drawing breath. Frank thought he must be having some sort of fit or seizure.

And then Frank heard movement behind him in the dark passageway. He turned to look, and found himself paralyzed with fright.

Something was slithering toward him along the dark corridor floor, and as it drew nearer to the sliver of firelight, he realized with a thrill of terror that it was a gigantic snake, at least twelve feet long. Horrified, transfixed, Frank stared as its undulating body cut a wide, curving track through the thick dust on the floor, coming closer and closer — What was he to do? The only means of escape was into the room where two men sat plotting murder, yet if he stayed where he was the snake would surely kill him —

But before he had made his decision, the snake was level with him, and then, incredibly, miraculously, it was passing; it was following the spitting, hissing noises made by the cold voice beyond the door, and in seconds, the tip of its diamond-patterned tail had vanished through the gap.

There was sweat on Frank’s forehead now, and the hand on the walking stick was trembling. Inside the room, the cold voice was continuing to hiss, and Frank was visited by a strange idea, an impossible idea. . . . *This man could talk to snakes.*

Frank didn’t understand what was going on. He wanted more than

anything to be back in his bed with his hot-water bottle. The problem was that his legs didn't seem to want to move. As he stood there shaking and trying to master himself, the cold voice switched abruptly to English again.

"Nagini has interesting news, Wormtail," it said.

"In-deed, my Lord?" said Wormtail.

"Indeed, yes," said the voice. "According to Nagini, there is an old Muggle standing right outside this room, listening to every word we say."

Frank didn't have a chance to hide himself. There were footsteps, and then the door of the room was flung wide open.

A short, balding man with graying hair, a pointed nose, and small, watery eyes stood before Frank, a mixture of fear and alarm in his face.

"Invite him inside, Wormtail. Where are your manners?"

The cold voice was coming from the ancient armchair before the fire, but Frank couldn't see the speaker. The snake, on the other hand, was curled up on the rotting hearth rug, like some horrible travesty of a pet dog.

Wormtail beckoned Frank into the room. Though still deeply shaken, Frank took a firmer grip upon his walking stick and limped over the threshold.

The fire was the only source of light in the room; it cast long, spidery shadows upon the walls. Frank stared at the back of the armchair; the man inside it seemed to be even smaller than his servant, for Frank couldn't even see the back of his head.

"You heard everything, Muggle?" said the cold voice.

“What’s that you’re calling me?” said Frank defiantly, for now that he was inside the room, now that the time had come for some sort of action, he felt braver; it had always been so in the war.

“I am calling you a Muggle,” said the voice coolly. “It means that you are not a wizard.”

“I don’t know what you mean by wizard,” said Frank, his voice growing steadier. “All I know is I’ve heard enough to interest the police tonight, I have. You’ve done murder and you’re planning more! And I’ll tell you this too,” he added, on a sudden inspiration, “my wife knows I’m up here, and if I don’t come back —”

“You have no wife,” said the cold voice, very quietly. “Nobody knows you are here. You told nobody that you were coming. Do not lie to Lord Voldemort, Muggle, for he knows . . . he always knows. . . .”

“Is that right?” said Frank roughly. “Lord, is it? Well, I don’t think much of your manners, *my Lord*. Turn ’round and face me like a man, why don’t you?”

“But I am not a man, Muggle,” said the cold voice, barely audible now over the crackling of the flames. “I am much, much more than a man. However . . . why not? I will face you. . . . Wormtail, come turn my chair around.”

The servant gave a whimper.

“You heard me, Wormtail.”

Slowly, with his face screwed up, as though he would rather have done anything than approach his master and the hearth rug where the snake lay, the small man walked forward and began to turn the chair. The snake lifted its ugly triangular head and hissed slightly as the

legs of the chair snagged on its rug.

And then the chair was facing Frank, and he saw what was sitting in it. His walking stick fell to the floor with a clatter. He opened his mouth and let out a scream. He was screaming so loudly that he never heard the words the thing in the chair spoke as it raised a wand. There was a flash of green light, a rushing sound, and Frank Bryce crumpled. He was dead before he hit the floor.

Two hundred miles away, the boy called Harry Potter woke with a start.

*Titels beskikbaar in die Harry Potter-reeks
(in leesvolgorde)*

Harry Potter en die Towenaar se Steen

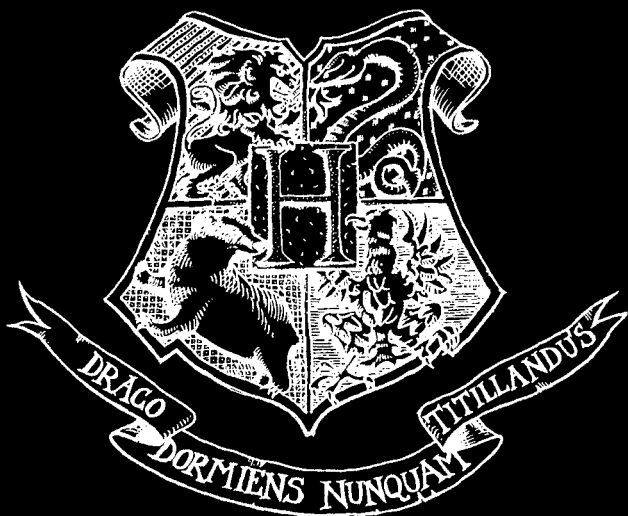
Harry Potter en die Kamer van Geheimenisse

Harry Potter en die Gevangene van Azkaban

Harry Potter en die Beker Vol Vuur

HARRY POTTER

en die Beker Vol Vuur



J.K. Rowling
Vertaal deur Janie Oosthuysen

Aan Peter Rowling, in herinnering aan mnr Ridley en aan Susan Sladden, wat gehelp het om Harry uit sy kas te kry.

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Geen gedeelte van hierdie boek mag sonder skriftelike verlof van die
uitgewer gereproduseer of in enige vorm of deur enige elektroniese of meganiese
middel weergegee word nie, hetsy deur fotokopieëring, plaat- of bandopname,
vermikrofilming of enige ander stelsel vir inligtingbewaring

Die Dhoewelshuis

Die inwoners van Little Hangleton noem dit nog steeds “die Dhoewels-huis” hoewel dit reeds baie jare is sedert die Dhoewelsgesin daar gewoon het. Dit staan op ’n bult wat oor die dorp uitkyk, sommige vensters is met planke toegespyker, van die dakteëls is weg en die voorkant is toegegroeï onder die klimop. Hoewel dit op sy dag ’n swierige herehuis en maklik een van die grootste en deftigste geboue in die omgewing was, is die Dhoewelshuis vandag klam en vervalte en staan dit leeg.

Almal in Little Hangleton stem saam dat die ou huis “grillerig” is. ’n Halfeeu gelede het iets vreemds en afgrysliks daar gebeur, iets waaroor die ouer inwoners van die dorp nog steeds graag praat wanneer daar min is om oor te skinder. Die verhaal is al soveel keer uitgerafel en so baie is al op plekke bygelas dat niemand meer weet wat nou eintlik die waarheid is nie. Elke weergawe begin egter op dieselfde plek: vyftig jaar gelede, teen dagbreek op ’n mooi someroggend, toe die Dhoewelshuis nog goed versorg en indrukwekkend was, het die huishulp by die sitkamer ingestap en al drie Dhoewels daar dood aangetref.

Die huishulp het skreeuend met die bult af dorp toe gehardloop en soveel mense moontlik wakker gemaak.

“Lê daar met starende oë! Koud soos ys! Nog in hul aandklere!”

Die polisie is ontbied en die hele Little Hangleton het geduisel van skok, nuuskierigheid en kwalik onderdrukte opwindung. Niemand het hul ams gemors deur voor te gee dat hulle vreeslik bedroef oor die Dhoewels was nie, want die Dhoewels was uiters ongewild. Die bejaarde mnr. en mev. Dhoewels was ryk, snobisties en ongepoets, en hul opgeskote seun, Erik, was selfs erger. Al wat vir die dorpenaars saak gemaak het, was wie die moordenaar kon wees – dit was duidelik dat drie skynbaar gesonde mense nie op dieselfde nag aan natuurlike oorsake kon sterf nie.

Daardie aand het The Hangman, die dorpskroeg, druk sake gedoen; die hele dorp het hul gesellige kaggelvure verlaat en was daar om die moorde te bespreek. Vir hierdie opoffering is hulle ryklik beloon, want die Dhoewels se kok het skielik dramaties in hul midde verskyn. Die

kroeg het doodstil geword toe sy aankondig dat 'n man met die naam van Frank Bryce so pas gearresteer is.

“Frank!” het verskeie mense uitgeroep. “Nooit!”

Frank Bryce was die Dhoewels se tuinier. Hy het alleen in 'n vervalle kothuis in die Dhoewels se tuin gewoon. Frank was in die oorlog en het 'n stywe been en 'n hekel aan massas mense en harde lawaai daarvan oorgehou. Na sy terugkoms het hy by die Dhoewels gaan werk.

Daar was 'n stormloop om vir die kok drankies te koop en meer besonderhede te hoor.

“Ek het nog altyd gedink dat hy eienaardig is,” het sy na haar vierde sjerrie vir die nuuskierige dorpenaars gesê. “Onvriendelik, soort van. Ek het seker al 'n honderd keer vir hom tee aangebied, maar nee, wil niks weet nie. Hou hom eenkant, daardie een.”

“Kom, kom,” het 'n vrou by die toonbank gesê, “hy het swaar gehad in die oorlog, hy wil stil leef. Dis g'n rede om hom te verdink —”

“Wie anders het miskien 'n sleutel vir die agterdeur, hè?” het die kok geblaf. “Vir so lank terug as wat ek kan onthou, hang daar 'n ekstra sleutel in die tuinier se kothuis! Niemand het die deur laas nag oopgebreek nie! Daar's nie 'n enkele stukkende venster nie! Al wat Frank moes doen, was om na die groot huis te sluip terwyl ons almal vas slaap . . .”

Die dorpenaars het betekenisvol na mekaar gekyk.

“Ek het nog altyd gedink hy lyk gemeen,” het 'n man by die toonbank gegrom.

“Die oorlog het hom aangetas, as jy my vra,” het die kroegeienaar gesê.

“Het mos vir jou gesê ek sal hom nie graag antagoniseer nie, nè, Dot?” het 'n vrou opgewonde uit die hoek gesê.

“Verskriklike humeur,” het Dot geantwoord en met oorgawe geknik. “Ek onthou toe hy 'n kind was . . .”

Teen die volgende oggend was almal in Little Hangleton oortuig daarvan dat Frank Bryce die Dhoewels vermoor het.

In die naburige dorp, Great Hangleton, in die somber en rokerige, vuil polisiestasie, het Frank egter koppig herhaal dat hy onskuldig is en dat die enigste persoon wat hy op die dag van die Dhoewels se dood naby die huis gesien het, 'n tienerseun was, 'n vreemdeling, bleek en met donker hare. Niemand anders in die dorp het so 'n seun gesien nie en die polisie was daarvan oortuig dat Frank hom versin het.

Net toe sake baie donker vir Frank begin lyk, kom die verslag oor die Dhoewels se liggame terug en verander alles.

Die polisie het nog nooit 'n eienaardiger verslag gelees nie. 'n Span dokters het die liggame ondersoek en tot die gevolgtrekking gekom dat die Dhoewels nie vergiftig, doodgesteek, geskiet, verwurg, versmoor of (vir sover hulle kon sien) hoegenaamd enige kwaad aangedoen is nie. Om die waarheid te sê, het die verslag in 'n duidelik verwarde trant

voortgegaan, die Dhoewels het almal heeltemal gesond gelyk – behalwe dat hulle dood was. Die dokters het wel opgelet (asof hulle vasbeslote was om wel met die liggame fout te vind) dat al die Dhoewels ’n uitdrukking van uiterste angs op hul gesigte gehad het – maar soos die gefrustreerde polisie gesê het, wie het al ooit gehoor van drie mense wat hulself doodgeskrik het?

Aangesien daar geen bewyse was dat die Dhoewels inderdaad vermoor is nie, was die polisie genoodsaak om Frank vry te laat. Die Dhoewels is in Little Hangleton se begraafplaas begrawe en hul grafte is vir ’n geruime tyd as ’n groot besienswaardigheid besoek. Tot almal se verbasing het Frank Bryce, onder ’n wolk van verdenking, na sy kothuis in die Dhoewelshuis se tuin teruggekeer.

“Wat my betref, is dit hy wat hulle vermoor het. Dit traak my nie wat die polisie sê nie,” het Dot in The Hangman gesê. “As hy ’n greintjie ordentlikheid gehad het, sou hy homself uit die voete gemaak het, siende dat ons almal weet dat dit hy was.”

Frank het egter nie weggegaan nie. Hy het aangebly en vir die volgende gesin wat in die Dhoewelshuis kom woon het in die tuin gewerk, en daarna vir die volgende – want geen gesin het lank gebly nie. Dalk was dit deels oor Frank dat elke nuwe eenaar gesê het dat daar ’n nare gevoel aan die plek is, wat, omdat niemand meer daar wou woon nie, later erg agteruitgegaan het.

Die ryk man wat deesdae die Dhoewelshuis besit, woon nie daar nie. Hy gebruik die eiendom glad nie; die mense van die dorp sê dat hy dit vir “belastingdoeleindes” aanhou, hoewel niemand mooi weet wat dit beteken nie. Die ryk eenaar betaal egter nog steeds vir Frank om die tuinkwerk te doen. Frank, wat nou amper sewe-en-sewentig is, is baie doof en sy slegte been is stywer as tevore, maar op mooi dae werskaf hy nog steeds in die blombeddings, hoewel die onkruid stadig besig is om die oorhand te kry.

Onkruid is egter nie al waarteen Frank moet stry nie. Die dorpseuns het ’n gewoonte daarvan begin maak om klippe deur die Dhoewelshuis se vensters te gooi. Hulle ry met hul fietse oor die grasperke na al die moeite wat Frank gedoen het om hulle egalig glad te kry. Hulle daag mekaar selfs ’n paar keer uit om by die ou huis in te breek. Hulle weet dat ou Frank verknog is aan die huis en tuin en dis vir hulle baie amusant as hy met sy stok bo sy kop aangehink kom en aamborstig op hulle skree. Op sy beurt is Frank daarvan oortuig dat die seuns hom so molesteer omdat hulle, net soos hul ouers en grootouers, dink dat hy ’n moordenaar is. Toe Frank dus een nag in Augustus wakker word en iets baie vreemds by die ou huis oplet, neem hy aan dat die seuns weer eens daarop uit is om sy lewe te vergal.

Dit is Frank se slegte been wat hom wakker gemaak het; noudat hy oud is, is dit seerder as ooit tevore. Hy staan op en hink met die trappe af kombuis toe om sy warmwatersak weer vol te maak en só die styfheid in sy knie te verlig. Terwyl hy die ketel by die wasbak voltap, kyk hy op na die Dhoewelshuis en sien ligte in die boonste vensters glimmer. Onmiddellik weet Frank wat aan die gang is. Die seuns het weer by die huis ingebreek en aan die flikkering van die ligte kan hy sien dat hulle 'n vuur gemaak het.

Frank het nie 'n telefoon nie. Wat meer is, sedert hy na die Dhoewels se dood in hegtenis geneem is, wantrou hy die polisie terdeë. Hy sit die ketel dadelik neer en haas hom so vinnig as wat sy swak been hom kan dra boontoe. Kort daarna is hy terug in die kombuis, ten volle aangetrek. Hy haal 'n verroeste sleutel van die haak langs die deur af. Toe neem hy sy kiere wat gestut teen die muur staan en stap die nag in.

Daar is nie 'n teken dat die Dhoewelshuis se voordeur of vensters oopgeforseer is nie. Frank hobbels dus om die huis na agter, tot by 'n deur wat feitlik heeltemal deur klimop oorgroei is. Daar haal hy die ou sleutel uit, steek dit in die slot en maak die deur geluidloos oop.

Hy bevind homself in 'n spelonkagtige kombuis. Frank was jare gelede laas hier binne en boonop is dit pikdonker, tog weet hy presies waar die deur is wat na die voorportaal lei. Hy voel-voel sy pad soontoe, sy neusgate gevul met die reuk van verrotting en sy ore gespits vir die geluid van voetstappe of stemme van daar bo af. Dan is hy in die portaal waar daar ietwat meer lig is omdat daar groot vensterroeie aan weerskante van die voordeur is. Hy begin om die trappe te klim terwyl hy sy sterre dank dat die stof so dik op die klippe lê dat dit die geluid van sy voetstappe en sy kiere demp.

Op die trapportaal draai Frank regs en sien dadelik waar die indringers is: 'n deur aan die end van die gang staan halfoop; 'n flikkerende lig val deur die skreef en gooi 'n lang goue straal oor die swart vloer. Frank skuifel nader en nader, sy kiere styf in sy hand vasgekleem. 'n Paar tree van die ingang af kan hy 'n smal gedeelte van die binnekant van die vertrek sien.

Hy sien ook dat die vuur van die vuurherd kom. Dit verbaas hom. Hy steek vas en luister aandagtig, want 'n man se stem klink op uit die vertrek; dit klink pieperig en bang.

“Daar is nog 'n klein bietjie in die bottel, my heer, indien u nog honger is.”

“Later,” sê 'n tweede stem. Ook hierdie stem behoort aan 'n man – maar dit is vreemd hoog en so koud soos 'n skielike vlaag ysige wind. Iets aan daardie stem laat die hare in Frank se nek penorent staan. “Stoot my nader aan die vuur, Wurmstert.”

Frank draai sy regteroor na die deur om beter te kan luister. Hy hoor

die rinkelings van 'n bottel wat op 'n harde oppervlak neergesit word, en toe die dowwe skraapgeluid van 'n swaar stoel wat oor die vloer getrek word. Frank kry 'n glimp van 'n klein man wat, met sy rug na die deur, die stoel op sy plek stoot. Hy dra 'n lang swart mantel en daar is 'n kaal kol op sy agterkop. Toe verdwyn hy uit sig.

“Waar is Nagini?” vra die koue stem.

“Ek – ek weet nie, my heer,” sê die eerste stem senuagtig. “Ek dink sy het die huis gaan verken . . .”

“Jy moet haar melk voor ons gaan slaap, Wurmstert,” sê die tweede stem. “Ek sal vannag gevoed moet word. Die reis het my baie uitgeput.”

Met 'n diep frons hou Frank sy goeie oor nog nader aan die deur en luister fyn. Weer is daar 'n stilte en toe praat die man wat Wurmstert genoem word opnuut.

“My heer, mag ek vra hoe lank ons hier gaan bly?”

“'n Week,” sê die koue stem. “Dalk langer. Die plek is redelik gerieflik en ons kan nie nou al met ons plan voortgaan nie. Dit sal dwaas wees om iets te probeer voor die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker verby is.”

Frank steek 'n knoesterige vinger in sy oor en draai dit in die rondte. Daar moet 'n groot klomp was in wees, want hy is seker dat hy die woord “Kwiddiek” gehoor het, iets wat glad nie 'n woord is nie.

“Die – die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker, my heer?” sê Wurmstert (Frank draai sy vinger nog kragtiger in sy oor rond). “Vergewe my, maar – ek verstaan nie – hoekom moet ons tot na die Wêreldbeker wag?”

“Omdat, dwaas, towenaars van regoor die wêreld op hierdie oomblik na hierdie land stroom en omdat elke bemoeisieke lid van die Ministerie van Towerkuns op diens sal wees, op die uitkyk vir tekens van ongewone aktiwiteit, die nagaan en dubbele kontrole van identiteite. Hulle sal behep wees met sekuriteit, net ingeval die Moggels iets sou merk. Dus wag ons.”

Frank het opgehou om sy oor te probeer skoonmaak. Hy het die woorde “Ministerie vir Towerkuns”, “towenaars” en “Moggels” duidelik gehoor. Klaarblyklik is elkeen van hierdie uitdrukkings 'n geheime kode en Frank kan net aan twee soorte mense dink wat in kodes praat – spioene en misdadigers. Frank verstyf sy houvas op sy kiere en gaan nog nader om fyn te luister.

“My heer is dus nog steeds vasberade?” sê Wurmstert gedemp.

“Natuurlik is ek vasberade, Wurmstert.” Nou is daar 'n dreigende toon in die koue stem.

'n Kort stilte volg – en toe Wurmstert weer praat, tuimel die woorde gejaag oor sy lippe asof hy homself dwing om te praat voor sy moed hom begeef.

“Dit kan sonder Harry Potter gedoen word, my heer.”

Nog 'n stilte volg, meer uitgerek, en dan –

“Sonder Harry Potter?” sis die tweede stem sag. “Ek sien . . .”

“My heer, ek sê dit nie uit besorgdheid oor die seun nie!” sê Wurmstert en sy stem word hoër en skriller. “Die seun beteken niks vir my nie, hoegenaamd niks! Dit is bloot dat indien ons ’n ander heks of towenaar sou gebruik – enige towenaar – kan die daad soveel gouer plaasvind! As u my sou toelaat om u vir ’n kort tydjie te verlaat – u weet dat ek myself baie doeltreffend kan vermom – ek sal binne twee dae terug wees met ’n geskikte persoon –”

“Ek kan seker ’n ander towenaar gebruik,” sê die tweede stem sag, “dit is waar . . .”

“My heer, dit maak sin,” sê Wurmstert en hy klink besonder verlig. “Om Harry Potter in die hande te kry, sal bitter moeilik wees, hy word baie goed beskerm –”

“Dus bied jy aan om ’n plaasvervanger te vind? Ek wonder . . . dalk is die taak om my te verpleeg, besig om jou onder te kry, Wurmstert? Is hierdie voorstel om die plan te laat vaar dalk niks anders as ’n poging om my te verlaat nie?”

“My heer! Ek – ek het geen begeerte om u te verlaat nie, hoegenaamd geen –”

“Moenie vir my lieg nie!” sis die tweede stem. “Ek weet altyd, Wurmstert! Jy is spyt dat jy na my teruggekeer het. Ek walg jou. Ek sien hoe jy ineenkrimp elke keer dat jy na my kyk, ek voel hoe jy sidder as jy aan my raak . . .”

“Nee! My toewyding aan u –”

“Jou toewyding is niks meer as lafhartigheid nie. Jy sou nie hier ge-wees het as jy ’n ander heenkome gehad het nie. Hoe kan ek sonder jou oorleef, ek wat elke paar uur gevoed moet word? Wie sal vir Nagini melk?”

“Maar u lyk soveel sterker, my heer –”

“Leuenaar,” hyg die tweede stem. “Ek is niks sterker nie en ’n paar dae op my eie sal genoeg wees om my van die bietjie krag te beroof wat ek onder jou lomp versorging herwin het. Bly stil!”

Wurmstert, wat onsamehangend begin brabbel het, bly dadelik stil. Vir ’n paar oomblikke kan Frank niks hoor behalwe die geknetter van die vuur nie. Toe praat die tweede man weer in ’n fluisterstem wat feitlik ’n siggeluid is.

“Soos ek reeds aan jou verduidelik het, het ek my redes waarom ek die seun wil gebruik en geen ander een nie. Ek wag al dertien jaar. Nog ’n paar maande sal nie ’n verskil maak nie. Wat die sekuriteit om die seun betref, glo ek dat my plan effektief sal wees. Al wat nodig is, is ’n bietjie moed van jou kant af, Wurmstert – moed wat jy sal moet vind, tensy jy die volle omvang van die heer Woldemort se woede wil ervaar –”

“My heer, ek moet praat!” sê Wurmstert en nou is sy stem paniekerig.

"Terwyl ons op reis was, het ek die plan oor en oor deurdink – my heer, Bertha Jurgens se verdwyning sal nie baie langer onopgemerk bly nie, en as ons sou voortgaan, as ek 'n vloek –"

"As?" fluister die tweede stem. "As? As jy die plan volg, Wurmstert, sal die Ministerie nooit weet dat iemand anders verdwyn het nie. Jy sal dit ongemerk doen, sonder enige ophef; hoe wens ek nie dat ek dit self kon doen nie, maar in my huidige toestand . . . Komaan, Wurmstert, nog net een struikelblok om uit die weg te ruim en ons pad na Harry Potter is oop. Ek vra jou nie om dit op jou eie te doen nie. Teen daardie tyd sal my getroue dienskneg weer by ons aangesluit het –"

"Ek is 'n getroue dienskneg," sê Wurmstert met 'n sweem van norsheid in sy stem.

"Wurmstert, ek benodig iemand met verstand, iemand wie se lojaliteit nog nooit gewankel het nie, en ongelukkig voldoen jy nie aan een van hierdie vereistes nie."

"Ek het u gevind," sê Wurmstert en nou is daar beslis 'n nukkerige toon in sy stem. "Dit was ek wat u gevind het. Ek het Bertha Jurgens vir u gebring."

"Dit is waar," sê die tweede persoon en hy klink geamuseerd. "n Brilljante ingewing wat ek nie van jou verwag het nie, Wurmstert. Hoewel, as ons by die waarheid bly, sou ons moes erken dat jy nie regtig geweet het presies hoe bruikbaar sy gaan wees toe jy haar gevang het nie, nie waar nie?"

"Ek – ek het gedink dat sy bruikbaar sou wees, my heer –"

"Leuenaar," sê die tweede persoon weer en nou is die wrede vermaak nog meer opvallend. "Ek sal egter nie ontken dat haar inligting uiters waardevol was nie. Daarsonder sou ek nooit ons plan kon formuleer nie en daarvoor sal jy beloon word, Wurmstert. Ek sal jou toelaat om 'n noodsaaklike taak vir my te verrig, een waarvoor baie van my volgelinge hul regterhande sal gee . . ."

"R-regtig, my heer? Wat –?" Wurmstert klink van voor af verskrik.

"A, Wurmstert, jy wil tog nie die verrassing bederf nie, of hoe? Jou aandeel kom eers heel teen die einde . . . maar ek verseker jou jy sal die eer hê om net so bruikbaar soos Bertha Jurgens te wees."

"U . . . u . . ." Wurmstert se stem is skielik hees, nes of sy mond baie droog geword het. "U . . . gaan my . . . my ook doodmaak?"

"Wurmstert, Wurmstert," sê die koue stem syerig, "waarom sal ek jou wil doodmaak? Ek het Bertha doodgemaak omdat ek moes. Na die ondervraging was sy vir niks anders geskik nie, totaal nutteloos. Wat meer is, die Ministerie sou lastige vrae gevra het indien sy sou teruggaan met die tyding dat sy jou tydens haar vakansie gesien het. ~~Toweraars wat veronderstel is om dood te wees, moet liever nie werknemers van die Ministerie by kleinerige herberge raakloop nie . . .~~

Wurmstert mompel iets so gesmoords dat Frank dit nie kan hoor nie, maar dit laat die tweede persoon lag – 'n vreugdelose lag wat net so koud soos sy woorde is.

“*Ons kon haar geheue gewysig het? Maar geheuetowerspreuke kan deur 'n magtige towenaar gebreek word, soos ek bewys het toe ek haar onder-vra het. Ek kan haar nagedagtenis nie onteer deur die inligting wat ek uit haar getrek het nie te gebruik nie, Wurmstert.*”

Buite in die gang is Frank skielik daarvan bewus dat die hand wat sy kierie vasklou sopnat gesweet is. Die man met die koue stem het 'n vrou vermoor. Hy praat daarvan sonder enige teken van berou – asof dit hom amuseer. Hy is gevaarlik – 'n mal mens. Boonop beplan hy verdere moorde – hierdie seun, Harry Potter, wie hy ook al mag wees – is in gevaar.

Frank weet wat hy moet doen. Nou, meer as ooit tevore, moet hy polisie toe gaan. Hy gaan uit hierdie huis sluip tot by die telefoonhokkie onder in die dorp . . . maar die koue stem praat reeds weer en Frank bly vas-genael staan om te luister.

“Net nog een vloek . . . van my troue dienskneg by Hogwarts . . . en Harry Potter is so goed soos myne, Wurmstert. Die besluit is geneem. Daar sal geen verdere argumente wees nie. Maar stil . . . ek dink ek hoor vir Nagini . . .”

Die tweede man se stem het verander. Hy is besig om geluide te maak soos Frank nog nooit voorheen gehoor het nie; hy sis en spoeg sonder om eens asem te skep. Dit klink vir Frank asof hy besig is om 'n toeval of 'n beroerte te kry.

Dan hoor Frank 'n beweging agter hom in die donker gang. Hy draai om om te kyk, en is eensklaps verlam van vrees.

Iets is besig om oor die donker gangvloer na hom toe te seil; toe dit naby genoeg aan die streep lig van die vuur is, besef hy met 'n tinteling van vrees dat dit 'n reusagtige slang van ten minste vier meter lank is. Verskrik, vasgenaël, staar Frank na die kronkelende lyf wat 'n breë, golvende spoor in die dik stof op die vloer maak. Nader en nader kom dit – wat gaan hy doen? Die enigste ontsnappingsroete is deur die kamer waarin die twee mans moordplanne sit en smee, en as hy sou bly waar hy is, sal die slang hom vir seker doodmaak –

Voor hy egter 'n besluit kan neem, is die slang langs hom en toe, ongelooflik, wonder bo wonder, seil hy verby; hy volg die spoegende, sis-sende geluide wat die koue stem agter die deur maak. Binne sekondes verdwyn die punt van die diamantpatroontert deur die opening.

Nou staan die sweet op Frank se voorkop en die hand op sy kierie bewe. Die koue stem binne die vertrek maak nog steeds sisgeluide en 'n vreemde idee neem van Frank besit, 'n onmoontlike gedagte . . . *Hierdie man kan met slange praat.*

Frank snap nie dadelik wat aangaan nie. Hy wil so graag terug in sy

herd wees met sy warmwatersak. Die probleem is net dat sy bene nie wil roer nie. Terwyl hy bewend staan en sukkel om beheer oor homself te herwin, praat die koue stem skielik weer.

“Nagini het interessante nuus, Wurmstert,” sê hy.

“In-inderdaad, my heer?” sê Wurmstert.

“Inderdaad, ja,” sê die stem. “Volgens Nagini staan daar ’n ou Moggel net buite die kamer in die gang en luister na elke woord wat ons sê.”

Vir Frank is daar nie ’n wegkruipkans nie. Voetstappe klink op en die deur na die vertrek word wyd oopgegooi.

’n Kort man, effens kaalkop met grys hare, ’n puntneus en klein, waterige ogies staan voor Frank. Daar is ’n mengsel van vrees en skok op sy gesig.

“Nooi hom in, Wurmstert. Waar is jou maniere?”

Die koue stem kom uit die antieke leunstoel voor die vuurherd, maar Frank kan die spreker nie sien nie. Die slang, daarenteen, lê soos ’n grillerige skoothond opgekrul op die verrotte mat voor die vuur.

Wurmstert beduie dat Frank moet inkom. Hoewel hy nog steeds van skok bewe, vat Frank sy kiere in ’n ferm greep vas en tree hinkend oor die drumpel.

Die vuur is die enigste bron van lig in die vertrek; dit gooi lang, spinnekopagtige skaduwees teen die mure. Frank staar na die agterkant van die leunstoel; die man wat daarin sit, moet selfs kleiner as sy dienskneg wees, want Frank kan nie die agterkant van sy kop sien nie.

“Het jy alles gehoor, Moggel?” vra die koue stem.

“Wat noem jy my?” sê Frank uitdagend. Noudat hy in die vertrek is, noudat dit tyd is om tot aksie oor te gaan, voel hy heelwat dapperder; dit was in die oorlog ook altyd so.

“Ek noem jou ’n Moggel,” sê die stem kil. “Dit beteken dat jy nie ’n towenaar is nie.”

“Ek weet nie wat jy met towenaar bedoel nie,” sê Frank en sy stem word al sterker. “Al wat ek weet, is dat ek vanaand genoeg gehoor het wat die polisie sal interesseer. Julle het moord gepleeg en julle beplan nog moorde! Verstaan my mooi,” voeg hy op ’n skielike ingewing by, “my vrou weet dat ek hier bo is en as ek nie teruggaan nie –”

“Jy het nie ’n vrou nie,” sê die koue stem baie sag. “Niemand weet dat jy hier is nie. Jy het vir niemand vertel dat jy hierheen kom nie. Moenie vir die heer Woldemort lieg nie, Moggel, want hy weet . . . hy weet altyd . . .”

“Is dit so?” sê Frank ruweg. “Heer, nogal? Wel, ek dink nie te veel van jou maniere nie, my heer. Hoekom draai jy nie om en kyk my in die oë soos ’n man nie?”

“Maar ek is nie ’n man nie, Moggel,” sê die koue stem, nou skaars hoorbaar bo die geknetter van die vlamme. “Ek is baie, baie meer as ’n

man. Maar nou ja, hoekom nie? Ek sal jou in die oë kyk . . . Wurmstert, draai my stoel om.”

Die dienskneg kreun.

“Jy het my gehoor, Wurmstert.”

Stadig, met sy gesig vertrek, asof hy enigiets anders eerder sal doen as om na sy meester en die mat met die slang te moet gaan, beweeg die klein mannetjie vorentoe en begin om die stoel om te draai. Die slang lig sy lelike driehoekige kop en sis effens toe die stoel se pote aan sy mat vashaak.

Toe draai die stoel na Frank en hy sien wat daarop sit. Sy kiere tref die vloer kletterend. Sy mond val oop en hy uiter 'n kreet. Hy skreeu so hard dat hy glad nie kan hoor wat die ding in die stoel sê toe hy sy towerstaf lig nie. Daar is 'n groen ligflits, 'n suisgeluid en toe sak Frank Bryce in-mekaar. Hy is dood nog voor hy die grond tref.

Driehonderd kilometer daarvandaan skrik die seun met die naam Harry Potter eensklaps wakker.

CHAPTER TWO



THE SCAR

Harry lay flat on his back, breathing hard as though he had been running. He had awoken from a vivid dream with his hands pressed over his face. The old scar on his forehead, which was shaped like a bolt of lightning, was burning beneath his fingers as though someone had just pressed a white-hot wire to his skin.

He sat up, one hand still on his scar, the other reaching out in the darkness for his glasses, which were on the bedside table. He put them on and his bedroom came into clearer focus, lit by a faint, misty orange light that was filtering through the curtains from the street lamp outside the window.

Harry ran his fingers over the scar again. It was still painful. He turned on the lamp beside him, scrambled out of bed, crossed the room, opened his wardrobe, and peered into the mirror on the inside of the door. A skinny boy of fourteen looked back at him, his bright

green eyes puzzled under his untidy black hair. He examined the lightning-bolt scar of his reflection more closely. It looked normal, but it was still stinging.

Harry tried to recall what he had been dreaming about before he had awoken. It had seemed so real. . . . There had been two people he knew and one he didn't. . . . He concentrated hard, frowning, trying to remember. . . .

The dim picture of a darkened room came to him. . . . There had been a snake on a hearth rug . . . a small man called Peter, nicknamed Wormtail . . . and a cold, high voice . . . the voice of Lord Voldemort. Harry felt as though an ice cube had slipped down into his stomach at the very thought. . . .

He closed his eyes tightly and tried to remember what Voldemort had looked like, but it was impossible. . . . All Harry knew was that at the moment when Voldemort's chair had swung around, and he, Harry, had seen what was sitting in it, he had felt a spasm of horror, which had awoken him . . . or had that been the pain in his scar?

And who had the old man been? For there had definitely been an old man; Harry had watched him fall to the ground. It was all becoming confused. Harry put his face into his hands, blocking out his bedroom, trying to hold on to the picture of that dimly lit room, but it was like trying to keep water in his cupped hands; the details were now trickling away as fast as he tried to hold on to them. . . . Voldemort and Wormtail had been talking about someone they had killed, though Harry could not remember the name . . . and they had been plotting to kill someone else . . . *him!*

Harry took his face out of his hands, opened his eyes, and stared

around his bedroom as though expecting to see something unusual there. As it happened, there were an extraordinary number of unusual things in this room. A large wooden trunk stood open at the foot of his bed, revealing a cauldron, broomstick, black robes, and assorted spellbooks. Rolls of parchment littered that part of his desk that was not taken up by the large, empty cage in which his snowy owl, Hedwig, usually perched. On the floor beside his bed a book lay open; Harry had been reading it before he fell asleep last night. The pictures in this book were all moving. Men in bright orange robes were zooming in and out of sight on broomsticks, throwing a red ball to one another.

Harry walked over to the book, picked it up, and watched one of the wizards score a spectacular goal by putting the ball through a fifty-foot-high hoop. Then he snapped the book shut. Even Quidditch — in Harry's opinion, the best sport in the world — couldn't distract him at the moment. He placed *Flying with the Cannons* on his bedside table, crossed to the window, and drew back the curtains to survey the street below.

Privet Drive looked exactly as a respectable suburban street would be expected to look in the early hours of Saturday morning. All the curtains were closed. As far as Harry could see through the darkness, there wasn't a living creature in sight, not even a cat.

And yet . . . and yet . . . Harry went restlessly back to the bed and sat down on it, running a finger over his scar again. It wasn't the pain that bothered him; Harry was no stranger to pain and injury. He had lost all the bones from his right arm once and had them painfully regrown in a night. The same arm had been pierced by a venomous

foot-long fang not long afterward. Only last year Harry had fallen fifty feet from an airborne broomstick. He was used to bizarre accidents and injuries; they were unavoidable if you attended Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and had a knack for attracting a lot of trouble.

No, the thing that was bothering Harry was that the last time his scar had hurt him, it had been because Voldemort had been close by. . . . But Voldemort couldn't be here, now. . . . The idea of Voldemort lurking in Privet Drive was absurd, impossible. . . .

Harry listened closely to the silence around him. Was he half-expecting to hear the creak of a stair or the swish of a cloak? And then he jumped slightly as he heard his cousin Dudley give a tremendous grunting snore from the next room.

Harry shook himself mentally; he was being stupid. There was no one in the house with him except Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley, and they were plainly still asleep, their dreams untroubled and painless.

Asleep was the way Harry liked the Dursleys best; it wasn't as though they were ever any help to him awake. Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley were Harry's only living relatives. They were Muggles who hated and despised magic in any form, which meant that Harry was about as welcome in their house as dry rot. They had explained away Harry's long absences at Hogwarts over the last three years by telling everyone that he went to St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys. They knew perfectly well that, as an underage wizard, Harry wasn't allowed to use magic outside Hogwarts, but they were still apt to blame him for anything that went

wrong about the house. Harry had never been able to confide in them or tell them anything about his life in the Wizarding world. The very idea of going to them when they awoke, and telling them about his scar hurting him, and about his worries about Voldemort, was laughable.

And yet it was because of Voldemort that Harry had come to live with the Dursleys in the first place. If it hadn't been for Voldemort, Harry would not have had the lightning scar on his forehead. If it hadn't been for Voldemort, Harry would still have had parents. . . .

Harry had been a year old the night that Voldemort — the most powerful Dark wizard for a century, a wizard who had been gaining power steadily for eleven years — arrived at his house and killed his father and mother. Voldemort had then turned his wand on Harry; he had performed the curse that had disposed of many full-grown witches and wizards in his steady rise to power — and, incredibly, it had not worked. Instead of killing the small boy, the curse had rebounded upon Voldemort. Harry had survived with nothing but a lightning-shaped cut on his forehead, and Voldemort had been reduced to something barely alive. His powers gone, his life almost extinguished, Voldemort had fled; the terror in which the secret community of witches and wizards had lived for so long had lifted, Voldemort's followers had disbanded, and Harry Potter had become famous.

It had been enough of a shock for Harry to discover, on his eleventh birthday, that he was a wizard; it had been even more disconcerting to find out that everyone in the hidden Wizarding world knew his name. Harry had arrived at Hogwarts to find that heads

turned and whispers followed him wherever he went. But he was used to it now: At the end of this summer, he would be starting his fourth year at Hogwarts, and Harry was already counting the days until he would be back at the castle again.

But there was still a fortnight to go before he went back to school. He looked hopelessly around his room again, and his eye paused on the birthday cards his two best friends had sent him at the end of July. What would they say if Harry wrote to them and told them about his scar hurting?

At once, Hermione Granger's voice seemed to fill his head, shrill and panicky.

"Your scar hurt? Harry, that's really serious. . . . Write to Professor Dumbledore! And I'll go and check Common Magical Ailments and Afflictions. . . . Maybe there's something in there about curse scars. . . ."

Yes, that would be Hermione's advice: Go straight to the headmaster of Hogwarts, and in the meantime, consult a book. Harry stared out of the window at the inky blue-black sky. He doubted very much whether a book could help him now. As far as he knew, he was the only living person to have survived a curse like Voldemort's; it was highly unlikely, therefore, that he would find his symptoms listed in *Common Magical Ailments and Afflictions*. As for informing the headmaster, Harry had no idea where Dumbledore went during the summer holidays. He amused himself for a moment, picturing Dumbledore, with his long silver beard, full-length wizard's robes, and pointed hat, stretched out on a beach somewhere, rubbing suntan lotion onto his long crooked nose. Wherever Dumbledore was,

though, Harry was sure that Hedwig would be able to find him; Harry's owl had never yet failed to deliver a letter to anyone, even without an address. But what would he write?

Dear Professor Dumbledore, Sorry to bother you, but my scar hurt this morning. Yours sincerely, Harry Potter.

Even inside his head the words sounded stupid.

And so he tried to imagine his other best friend, Ron Weasley's, reaction, and in a moment, Ron's red hair and long-nosed, freckled face seemed to swim before Harry, wearing a bemused expression.

"Your scar hurt? But . . . but You-Know-Who can't be near you now, can he? I mean . . . you'd know, wouldn't you? He'd be trying to do you in again, wouldn't he? I dunno, Harry, maybe curse scars always twinge a bit. . . . I'll ask Dad. . . ."

Mr. Weasley was a fully qualified wizard who worked in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office at the Ministry of Magic, but he didn't have any particular expertise in the matter of curses, as far as Harry knew. In any case, Harry didn't like the idea of the whole Weasley family knowing that he, Harry, was getting jumpy about a few moments' pain. Mrs. Weasley would fuss worse than Hermione, and Fred and George, Ron's sixteen-year-old twin brothers, might think Harry was losing his nerve. The Weasleys were Harry's favorite family in the world; he was hoping that they might invite him to stay any time now (Ron had mentioned something about the Quidditch World Cup), and he somehow didn't want his visit punctuated with anxious inquiries about his scar.

Harry kneaded his forehead with his knuckles. What he really wanted (and it felt almost shameful to admit it to himself) was

someone like — someone like a *parent*: an adult wizard whose advice he could ask without feeling stupid, someone who cared about him, who had had experience with Dark Magic. . . .

And then the solution came to him. It was so simple, and so obvious, that he couldn't believe it had taken so long — *Sirius*.

Harry leapt up from the bed, hurried across the room, and sat down at his desk; he pulled a piece of parchment toward him, loaded his eagle-feather quill with ink, wrote *Dear Sirius*, then paused, wondering how best to phrase his problem, still marveling at the fact that he hadn't thought of Sirius straight away. But then, perhaps it wasn't so surprising — after all, he had only found out that Sirius was his godfather two months ago.

There was a simple reason for Sirius's complete absence from Harry's life until then — Sirius had been in Azkaban, the terrifying wizard jail guarded by creatures called dementors, sightless, soul-sucking fiends who had come to search for Sirius at Hogwarts when he had escaped. Yet Sirius had been innocent — the murders for which he had been convicted had been committed by Wormtail, Voldemort's supporter, whom nearly everybody now believed dead. Harry, Ron, and Hermione knew otherwise, however; they had come face-to-face with Wormtail only the previous year, though only Professor Dumbledore had believed their story.

For one glorious hour, Harry had believed that he was leaving the Dursleys at last, because Sirius had offered him a home once his name had been cleared. But the chance had been snatched away from him — Wormtail had escaped before they could take him to the Ministry of Magic, and Sirius had had to flee for his life. Harry had

helped him escape on the back of a hippogriff called Buckbeak, and since then, Sirius had been on the run. The home Harry might have had if Wormtail had not escaped had been haunting him all summer. It had been doubly hard to return to the Dursleys knowing that he had so nearly escaped them forever.

Nevertheless, Sirius had been of some help to Harry, even if he couldn't be with him. It was due to Sirius that Harry now had all his school things in his bedroom with him. The Dursleys had never allowed this before; their general wish of keeping Harry as miserable as possible, coupled with their fear of his powers, had led them to lock his school trunk in the cupboard under the stairs every summer prior to this. But their attitude had changed since they had found out that Harry had a dangerous murderer for a godfather — for Harry had conveniently forgotten to tell them that Sirius was innocent.

Harry had received two letters from Sirius since he had been back at Privet Drive. Both had been delivered, not by owls (as was usual with wizards), but by large, brightly colored tropical birds. Hedwig had not approved of these flashy intruders; she had been most reluctant to allow them to drink from her water tray before flying off again. Harry, on the other hand, had liked them; they put him in mind of palm trees and white sand, and he hoped that, wherever Sirius was (Sirius never said, in case the letters were intercepted), he was enjoying himself. Somehow, Harry found it hard to imagine dementors surviving for long in bright sunlight; perhaps that was why Sirius had gone south. Sirius's letters, which were now hidden beneath the highly useful loose floorboard under Harry's bed,

sounded cheerful, and in both of them he had reminded Harry to call on him if ever Harry needed to. Well, he needed to now, all right. . . .

Harry's lamp seemed to grow dimmer as the cold gray light that precedes sunrise slowly crept into the room. Finally, when the sun had risen, when his bedroom walls had turned gold, and when sounds of movement could be heard from Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia's room, Harry cleared his desk of crumpled pieces of parchment and reread his finished letter.

Dear Sirius,

Thanks for your last letter. That bird was enormous; it could hardly get through my window.

Things are the same as usual here. Dudley's diet isn't going too well. My aunt found him smuggling doughnuts into his room yesterday. They told him they'd have to cut his pocket money if he keeps doing it, so he got really angry and chucked his PlayStation out of the window. That's a sort of computer thing you can play games on. Bit stupid really, now he hasn't even got Mega-Mutilation Part Three to take his mind off things.

I'm okay, mainly because the Dursleys are terrified you might turn up and turn them all into bats if I ask you to.

A weird thing happened this morning, though. My scar hurt again. Last time that happened it was because Voldemort was at Hogwarts. But I don't reckon he can be anywhere near me now, can he? Do you know if curse scars sometimes hurt years afterward?

I'll send this with Hedwig when she gets back; she's off hunting at the moment. Say hello to Buckbeak for me.

Harry

Yes, thought Harry, that looked all right. There was no point putting in the dream; he didn't want it to look as though he was too worried. He folded up the parchment and laid it aside on his desk, ready for when Hedwig returned. Then he got to his feet, stretched, and opened his wardrobe once more. Without glancing at his reflection, he started to get dressed before going down to breakfast.

Die Litteken

Harry lê plat op sy rug en haal hard asem asof hy gehardloop het. Hy het van 'n besonder helder droom wakker geskrik met sy hande vasgedruk oor sy gesig. Die ou litteken op sy voorkop in die vorm van 'n weerligstraal brand onder sy vingers asof iemand 'n witwarm draad daarteen gedruk het.

Hy kom orent, een hand nog steeds op die litteken terwyl die ander een in die donker rondtas na sy bril wat op sy bedkassie lê. Toe hy dit opsit, kom sy slaapkamer skerp in fokus. Dit word verlig deur 'n dowwe, mistige oranje lig wat van die straatlamp voor sy venster deur die gordyne filter.

Weer vryf Harry se vingers oor die litteken. Dit is nog steeds seer. Hy skakel die lamp langs hom aan, klouter uit die bed, stap deur die vertrek, maak sy kas oop en kyk in die spieël aan die binnekant van die deur. 'n Skraal seun van veertien staar terug na hom; sy heldergroen oë lyk verward onder sy deurmekaar swart hare. Hy bekyk die weerligstraallitteken op sy weerkaatsing van naderby. Dit lyk normaal, maar dit brand nog steeds.

Harry probeer onthou wat hy gedroom het net voor hy wakker geword het. Dit het so eg gevoel . . . daar was twee mense wat hy ken en een wat hy nie ken nie . . . hy konsentreer hard, fronsend, probeer dit terugroep . . .

'n Dowwe prentjie van 'n donker vertrek kom na hom . . . daar was 'n slang op die kaggelmat . . . 'n klein man met die naam Pieter, wie se bynaam Wurmstert is . . . en 'n koue, hoë stem . . . die stem van die heer Woldemort. Dit voel vir Harry asof 'n ysblokkie tot onder in sy maag val by hierdie herinnering . . .

Hy maak sy oë styf toe en probeer onthou hoe Woldemort gelyk het, maar dit is onmoontlik . . . Al wat Harry weet, is dat op die oomblik toe Woldemort se stoel omgeswaai het sodat hy wat Harry is, kon sien wat daarin sit, het hy 'n golf van verskrikking ervaar wat hom laat wakker skrik het . . . of was dit van die pyn in sy litteken?

En wie was die ou man? Daar was beslis 'n ou man; Harry het gesien

hoe hy op die grond neerslaan. Alles is besig om baie deurmekaar te raak; Harry laat sak sy gesig in sy hande en probeer om sy kamer uit te sluit, om die prentjie van daardie dofverligte vertrek te behou, maar dit is soos water in jou bakhande; die besonderhede vloei deur sy vingers, vinniger as wat hy kan keer . . . Woldemort en Wurmstert het gepraat oor iemand wat hulle vermoor het, maar Harry kan die naam nie onthou nie . . . hulle het ook beplan om iemand anders dood te maak . . . vir *hom* . . .

Harry haal sy gesig uit sy hande, maak sy oë oop en staar om hom na sy kamer asof hy verwag om iets ongewoons daar te sien. Daar is toevallig inderdaad 'n buitengewone klomp goed in hierdie vertrek. 'n Groot hout-trommel staan oop aan die voetenent van sy bed. Daarin is 'n hekseketel, 'n besemstok, swart kledingstukke en 'n verskeidenheid towerboeke. Rolle perkament lê gesaai oor dié deel van sy lessenaar wat nie in beslag geneem word deur 'n groot, leë kou waarin sy sneeu-uil, Hedwig, gewoonlik sit nie. Op die vloer langs sy bed lê 'n boek oop; hy het die vorige aand voor hy gaan slaap het daaruit gelees. Die prente in hierdie boek beweeg almal. Mans in helderoranje mantels ry heen en weer op hul besems en verskyn en verdwyn uit sig terwyl hulle 'n rooi bal vir mekaar gooi.

Harry stap tot by hierdie boek, tel dit op en kyk hoe een van die toewenaars 'n skouspelagtige doel behaal deur die bal deur 'n twintig meter hoë hoepel te gooi. Toe klap hy die boek toe. Selfs Kwiddiek – volgens Harry die beste sport in die wêreld – kan op hierdie oomblik nie sy aandag aflei nie. Hy sit *Vlieg met die Kanonne* op sy bedkassie neer, stap na die venster en trek die gordyne oop om te kyk wat onder in die straat aangaan.

Ligusterlaan lyk net soos 'n ordentlike straat in 'n voorstedelike buurt in die vroeë oggendure op 'n Saterdag behoort te lyk. Al die gordyne is toegetrek. Sover Harry deur die donkerte kan sien, is daar nie 'n lewende siel op straat nie, nie eens 'n kat nie.

En tog . . . en tog . . . Harry loop rusteloos terug en gaan sit op sy bed terwyl hy weer eens met sy vinger aan sy litteken voel. Dit is nie die pyn wat hom hinder nie; Harry is gewoon aan pyn en beserings. Hy het eenkeer al die bene in sy regterarm verloor en hulle moes oornag pynlik teruggroei. Nie lank daarna nie is dieselfde arm deur 'n giftige, voet lange slagtang deurboor. Net verlede jaar het Harry twintig meter ver van sy besemstok afgeval. Hy is gewoon aan vreemde ongelukke en beserings; dit is onvermydelik as jy na die Hogwarts Skool vir Heksery en Towerkuns gaan en boonop die vermoë het om baie moeilikheid na jou toe aan te trek.

Nee, wat vir Harry pla, is die feit dat Woldemort in die nabyheid was toe sy litteken die vorige keer seer was . . . maar Woldemort kan nie nou hier wees nie . . . die gedagte aan Woldemort wat rondsluip in Ligusterlaan is belaglik, onmoontlik . . .

Harry luister gespanne na die stilte om hom. Verwag hy so half om 'n

trap te hoor kraak, of die geruis van 'n kleed? Hy skrik effens toe sy neef, Dudley, 'n bielie van 'n snork in die kamer langsaan los.

In sy gedagtes skud Harry homself; hy is nou regtig simpel; daar is niemand in die huis saam met hom buite oom Vernon, tant Petunia en Dudley nie, en hulle is duidelik vas aan die slaap, hul drome sorgvry en sonder kwellings van enige aard.

Vas aan die slaap is hoe Harry die meeste van die Dursleys hou; dis nie asof hulle hom ooit enigsins bystaan as hulle wakker is nie. Oom Vernon, tant Petunia en Dudley is Harry se enigste lewende familielede. Hulle is Moggels (niemagiëse mense) wat die towerkuns in enige vorm haat en veralsku. Dit beteken dat Harry omtrent net so welkom soos droëvrot in hul huis is. Oor die laaste drie jaar het hulle die lang tye dat Harry in Hogwarts is, verklaar deur vir almal te vertel dat hy by St Brutus se Veiligheidsentrum vir Ongeneeslik Kriminele Seuns is. Hulle weet baie goed dat Harry as 'n minderjarige towenaar nie buite Hogwarts mag toor nie, maar blameer hom nog steeds vir alles wat tuis skeef loop. Harry kon hulle nog nooit in sy vertrouë neem of enigiets oor sy lewe in die towerwêreld vir hulle vertel nie. Die idee om na hulle te gaan wanneer hulle wakker word en vir hulle te vertel dat sy litteken pyn en hoe bekommerd hy oor Woldemort is, is werklik lagwekkend.

Log is dit juis weens Woldemort dat Harry by die Dursleys moet woon. As dit nie vir Woldemort was nie, het Harry nie 'n weerligstraal-litteken op sy voorkop gehad nie. As dit nie vir Woldemort was nie, het Harry nog ouers gehad . . .

Harry was 'n jaar oud die nag toe Woldemort – die magtigste Donker towenaar in 'n eeu, 'n towenaar wat sy mag oor elf jaar geleidelik opgebou het – by hul huis aangekom en sy ma en pa vermoor het. Daarna het Woldemort sy towerstaf op Harry gerig; met sy vloek het hy toe al menige volwasse hekse en towenaars wat in sy pad gestaan het, uitgewis – maar hierdie keer het dit, wonder bo wonder, misluk. Pleks van om die klein seuntjie dood te maak, het die vloek op Woldemort teruggekaats. Harry het bly leef met slegs 'n wond in die vorm van 'n weerligstraal op sy voorkop, maar Woldemort was skaars lewend. Sy mag was gebreek, sy lewe was so te sê uitgedoof en hy het gevlug. Die tydperk van terreur waaronder die geheime towergemeenskappe so lank moes leef, was verby, Woldemort se volgelingen het ontbind en Harry Potter was beroemd.

Dit was 'n groot skok vir Harry toe hy op sy elfde verjaardag agterkom dat hy 'n towenaar is; dit was nog meer ontstellend om te moet hoor dat almal in die geheime towerwêreld sy naam ken. Toe Harry by Hogwarts aangekom het, het die koppe gedraai en mense het agter sy rug gefluister. Nou is hy egter gewoon daaraan: aan die einde van die somervakansie sal sy vierde jaar by Hogwarts begin en hy tel reeds die dae af tot hy weer terug kasteel toe kan gaan.

Daar is egter nog 'n volle twee weke oor voor hy weer skool toe kan gaan. Weer kyk hy wanhopig in sy kamer rond en sy blik val op die verjaardagkaarte wat sy twee beste vriende aan die einde van Julie vir hom gestuur het. Wat sal hulle sê as hy vir hulle sou skryf en sê dat sy litteken weer seer is?

Hermien la Grange se stem, skril en paniekbevange, vul onmiddellik sy kop.

“Jou litteken is seer? Harry, dit is regtig ernstig . . . Skryf vir professor Dompeldorius! En ek sal onmiddellik in Algemene Magiese Kwinte en Kwale gaan kyk . . . Dalk is daar iets oor littekens en vloeke . . .”

Ja, dit sal Hermien se raad wees: gaan reguit na Hogwarts se skoolhoof en kyk intussen in 'n boek. Harry staar deur die venster na die inkswart lug. Hy twyfel baie sterk of 'n boek hom enigszins sal kan help. Sover hy weet, is hy die enigste lewende persoon om 'n vloek soos Woldemort s'n te oorleef; dit is dus hoogs onwaarskynlik dat sy simptome in *Algemene Magiese Kwinte en Kwale* genoem sal word. Wat die skoolhoof betref, het Harry nie 'n idee waarheen Dompeldorius tydens die somervakansies gaan nie. Vir 'n rukkie vermaak hy homself deur 'n prentjie op te tower van Dompeldorius met sy lang silwer baard, vollengte towenaarskleed en gepunte hoed, uitgestrek iewers op 'n strand terwyl hy sonroom aan sy lang krom neus smeer. Waar Dompeldorius egter ook al mag wees, Harry is vas oortuig dat Hedwig hom wel sal vind; Harry se uil het nog altyd daarin geslaag om haar briewe af te lewer, selfs sonder 'n adres. Maar wat sal hy skryf?

Liewe professor Dompeldorius, jammer om u te pla, maar my litteken was vanoggend baie seer. Groete, Harry Potter.

Selfs in sy kop klink die woorde maar simpel.

Hy probeer dink hoe sy ander beste vriend, Ron Weasley, sal reageer en binne 'n oomblik swem Ron se verwilderde gesig met sy lang neus en sproete voor Harry se oë.

“Jou litteken is seer? Maar . . . maar Jy-Weet-Wie kan tog nie naby jou wees nie, of kan hy? Ek bedoel . . . jy sal tog weet, nie waar nie? Hy sal jou mos weer probeer vermoor, hê? Ek weet nie, Harry, miskien gee vloeklittekens altyd sulke steke . . . ek sal gou my pa gaan vra . . .”

Mnr. Weasley is 'n ten volle gekwalifiseerde towenaar wat in die Kantoor vir die Misbruik van Moggelartefakte by die Ministerie vir Towerkuns werk, maar sover Harry weet, het hy geen spesifieke kennis oor vloeke nie. Wat meer is, Harry hou net niks van die idee dat die hele Weasley-gesin moet weet dat hy, Harry, hom oor 'n paar oomblikke se pyn opwerk nie. Mev. Weasley sal erger as Hermien reageer, en Fred en George, Ron se sestienjarige tweelingbroers, sal dink dat Harry sag raak. Die Weasleys is Harry se gunstelinggesin in die wêreld; hy hou duim vas dat hulle hom binnekort sal nooi om te kom kuier (Ron het iets oor die

Kwiddlick-Wêreldbekerwedstryd gesê) en hy sal dit haat as almal gedurig tydens sy besoek besorg wil weet hoe sy litteken nou voel.

Harry knie sy voorkop met sy kneukels. Wat hy eintlik wil hê (en hy voel amper skaam om dit teenoor homself te erken), is iemand soos – soos 'n ouer: 'n volwasse towenaar vir wie hy raad kan vra sonder om stampel te voel, iemand wat vir hom omgee en wat ondervinding van die Donker Towerkunste het . . .

Skielik weet hy wat hy moet doen. Dit is so eenvoudig en so vanselfsprekend dat hy nie kan glo dat dit hom so lank gevat het nie – Sirius.

Harry spring van sy bed af, stap haastig deur die vertrek en gaan sit by sy lessenaar; hy trek 'n stuk perkament nader, dompel sy arendveerpen in die ink, skryf *Liewe Sirius* en steek vas terwyl hy wonder hoe om sy probleem ten beste te verwoord en waarom hy nie dadelik aan Sirius gedink het nie. Maar dan, dalk is dit ook nie so snaaks nie – hy het tog eers twee maande gelede ontdek dat Sirius sy peetpa is.

Daar is 'n eenvoudige rede vir Sirius se totale afwesigheid in Harry se lewe tot nou toe – Sirius was in Azkaban, die gevreesde towenaarstronk wat bewaak word deur wesens wat Dementors genoem word, gesiglose, suigsuiende demone wat vir Sirius na sy ontsnapping by Hogwarts kom soek het. Maar Sirius was onskuldig – die moorde waarvoor hy gevonnis is, is deur Woldemort se ondersteuner Wurmstert gepleeg, 'n man wat, so glo feitlik almal, nou dood is. Harry, Ron en Hermien weet egter wat regtig die geval is; hulle het Wurmstert die vorige jaar van aangesig tot aangesig ontmoet, hoewel net professor Dompeldorius hul weergawe geglo het.

Vir een ongelooflik wonderlike uur was Harry oortuig dat hy uiteindelik nie meer vakansies na die Dursleys hoef te gaan nie, want Sirius het aangebied dat Harry by hom kan kom woon sodra sy naam in ere herstel is. Hierdie geleentheid is hom egter ontsê – Wurmstert het ontsnap voor hulle hom na die Ministerie vir Towerkuns kon neem, en Sirius moes vir sy lewe vlug. Harry het hom gehelp om op die rug van Bokbok die Hippogrief te ontsnap en sederdien is Sirius op vlug. Die tuiste wat Harry sou gehad het indien Wurmstert nie ontsnap het nie, spook nog die hele somervakansie by hom. Dit was twee keer so swaar om na die Dursleys terug te gaan in die wete dat hy so amper vir altyd uit hulle lewe was.

Tog kon Sirius vir Harry help, selfs al kon hy nie by hom wees nie. Dit is aan Sirius te danke dat Harry nou al sy skoolgoed in sy kamer by hom het. Die Dursleys het dit nog nooit tevore toegelaat nie; hul begeerte om Harry so ongelukkig moontlik te maak tesame met hul vrees vir sy magte het veroorsaak dat hulle sy skooltrommel nog elke vorige somervakansie in die kas onder die trappe toegesluit het. Hul houding het egter verander toe hulle hoor dat Harry se peetpa 'n gevaarlike moordenaar is – Harry het gerieflikheidshalwe vergeet om vir hulle te sê dat Sirius onskuldig is.

Sedert sy aankoms by Ligusterlaan het Harry twee briewe van Sirius gehad. Albei is afgelewer, nie deur uile (soos towenaars gewoonlik maak) nie, maar deur groot, helderkleurige tropiese voëls. Hedwig het niks van hierdie kleurvolle indringers gehou nie; sy het hulle baie teensinnig toegelaat om uit haar waterbak te drink voor hulle weer weggevlieg het. Harry het egter van hulle gehou; hulle het hom aan palmbome en wit sand laat dink en hy het gehoop dat waar Sirius ook al mag wees (Sirius sê nooit nie, ingeval sy briewe onderskep word) hy dit geniet. Om die een of ander rede kan Harry nie sien hoe Dementors vir lang tye in helder sonlig kan oorleef nie; dalk is dit waarom Sirius suidwaarts gegaan het. Sirius se briewe, wat nou onder die baie nuttige los vloerplank onder Harry se bed versteek word, klink opgeruimd en in albei van hulle het hy vir Harry gemaan om hom te kontak as hy hom ooit nodig sou hê. Wel, hy het hom nou nodig . . .

Die koue, gryns lig net voor sonsopkoms kruip stadig by Harry se kamer in sodat dit lyk of sy lamp al dowwer word. Uiteindelik, toe die son op is en sy kamermure goudkleurig word en hy geluide en bewegings in oom Vernon en tant Petunia se kamer hoor, gooi Harry die opgefrommelde stukkies perkament op sy lessenaar weg en lees sy brief vir oulaas deur.

Liewe Sirius

Dankie vir jou vorige brief, daardie voël was enorm groot, dit kon skaars by my venster inkom.

Dit gaan nie juis goed met Dudley se dieet nie. My tante het hom gister betrap toe hy oliebolle na sy kamer wou smokkel. Hulle het vir hom gesê dat hulle sy sakgeld gaan verminder as hy aanhou om dit te doen; toe het hy baie kwaad geword en sy PlayStation deur een van die vensters gegooi. Dis 'n soort rekenaarding waarop 'n mens speletjies speel. Dit was 'n bietjie simpel, nou het hy nie eens meer deel drie van Mega-Mutilation om hom mee besig te hou nie.

Ek is heel oukei, eintlik net omdat die Dursleys bang is dat jy hierheen sal kom en hulle almal in vlermuise sal verander as ek jou sou vra om dit te doen.

Daar het vanoggend 'n baie snaakse ding gebeur. My litteken was weer seer. Die vorige keer dat dit gebeur het, was omdat Woldemort by Hogwarts was. Maar ek dink nie hy kan nou naby my wees nie, of wat dink jy? Weet jy of vloeklittekens soms jare later nog seer kan wees?

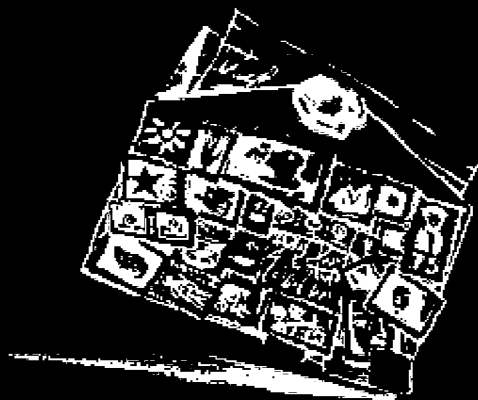
Ek stuur Hedwig hiermee sodra sy terugkom, sy jag op die oomblik. Sê groete vir Bokbok.

Harry.

Ja, dink Harry, dit lyk reg. Dis onnodig om oor die droom ook te skryf; hy wil nie hê dit moet lyk asof hy te bekommerd is nie. Hy vou die perka-

ment op en sit dit eenkant op sy lessenaar neer, gereed vir Hedwig wanneer sy terugkom. Toe staan hy op, rek hom uit en maak sy kas weer eens oop. Sonder om na sy weerkaatsing in die spieël kyk, trek hy hom aan voor hy afstap vir ontbyt.

CHAPTER THREE



THE INVITATION

By the time Harry arrived in the kitchen, the three Dursleys were already seated around the table. None of them looked up as he entered or sat down. Uncle Vernon's large red face was hidden behind the morning's *Daily Mail*, and Aunt Petunia was cutting a grapefruit into quarters, her lips pursed over her horselike teeth.

Dudley looked furious and sulky, and somehow seemed to be taking up even more space than usual. This was saying something, as he always took up an entire side of the square table by himself. When Aunt Petunia put a quarter of unsweetened grapefruit onto Dudley's plate with a tremulous "There you are, Diddy darling," Dudley glowered at her. His life had taken a most unpleasant turn since he had come home for the summer with his end-of-year report.

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had managed to find excuses for

his bad marks as usual: Aunt Petunia always insisted that Dudley was a very gifted boy whose teachers didn't understand him, while Uncle Vernon maintained that "he didn't want some swotty little nancy boy for a son anyway." They also skated over the accusations of bullying in the report — "He's a boisterous little boy, but he wouldn't hurt a fly!" Aunt Petunia had said tearfully.

However, at the bottom of the report there were a few well-chosen comments from the school nurse that not even Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia could explain away. No matter how much Aunt Petunia wailed that Dudley was big-boned, and that his poundage was really puppy fat, and that he was a growing boy who needed plenty of food, the fact remained that the school outfitters didn't stock knickerbockers big enough for him anymore. The school nurse had seen what Aunt Petunia's eyes — so sharp when it came to spotting fingerprints on her gleaming walls, and in observing the comings and goings of the neighbors — simply refused to see: that far from needing extra nourishment, Dudley had reached roughly the size and weight of a young killer whale.

So — after many tantrums, after arguments that shook Harry's bedroom floor, and many tears from Aunt Petunia — the new regime had begun. The diet sheet that had been sent by the Smeltings school nurse had been taped to the fridge, which had been emptied of all Dudley's favorite things — fizzy drinks and cakes, chocolate bars and burgers — and filled instead with fruit and vegetables and the sorts of things that Uncle Vernon called "rabbit food." To make Dudley feel better about it all, Aunt Petunia had insisted that the whole family follow the diet too. She now passed a grapefruit

quarter to Harry. He noticed that it was a lot smaller than Dudley's. Aunt Petunia seemed to feel that the best way to keep up Dudley's morale was to make sure that he did, at least, get more to eat than Harry.

But Aunt Petunia didn't know what was hidden under the loose floorboard upstairs. She had no idea that Harry was not following the diet at all. The moment he had got wind of the fact that he was expected to survive the summer on carrot sticks, Harry had sent Hedwig to his friends with pleas for help, and they had risen to the occasion magnificently. Hedwig had returned from Hermione's house with a large box stuffed full of sugar-free snacks. (Hermione's parents were dentists.) Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, had obliged with a sack full of his own homemade rock cakes. (Harry hadn't touched these; he had had too much experience of Hagrid's cooking.) Mrs. Weasley, however, had sent the family owl, Errol, with an enormous fruitcake and assorted meat pies. Poor Errol, who was elderly and feeble, had needed a full five days to recover from the journey. And then on Harry's birthday (which the Dursleys had completely ignored) he had received four superb birthday cakes, one each from Ron, Hermione, Hagrid, and Sirius. Harry still had two of them left, and so, looking forward to a real breakfast when he got back upstairs, he ate his grapefruit without complaint.

Uncle Vernon laid aside his paper with a deep sniff of disapproval and looked down at his own grapefruit quarter.

"Is this it?" he said grumpily to Aunt Petunia.

Aunt Petunia gave him a severe look, and then nodded pointedly at Dudley, who had already finished his own grapefruit quarter and was

eyeing Harry's with a very sour look in his piggy little eyes.

Uncle Vernon gave a great sigh, which ruffled his large, bushy mustache, and picked up his spoon.

The doorbell rang. Uncle Vernon heaved himself out of his chair and set off down the hall. Quick as a flash, while his mother was occupied with the kettle, Dudley stole the rest of Uncle Vernon's grapefruit.

Harry heard talking at the door, and someone laughing, and Uncle Vernon answering curtly. Then the front door closed, and the sound of ripping paper came from the hall.

Aunt Petunia set the teapot down on the table and looked curiously around to see where Uncle Vernon had got to. She didn't have to wait long to find out; after about a minute, he was back. He looked livid.

"You," he barked at Harry. "In the living room. Now."

Bewildered, wondering what on earth he was supposed to have done this time, Harry got up and followed Uncle Vernon out of the kitchen and into the next room. Uncle Vernon closed the door sharply behind both of them.

"So," he said, marching over to the fireplace and turning to face Harry as though he were about to pronounce him under arrest. "*So.*"

Harry would have dearly loved to have said, "So what?" but he didn't feel that Uncle Vernon's temper should be tested this early in the morning, especially when it was already under severe strain from lack of food. He therefore settled for looking politely puzzled.

"This just arrived," said Uncle Vernon. He brandished a piece of purple writing paper at Harry. "A letter. About you."

Harry's confusion increased. Who would be writing to Uncle

Vernon about him? Who did he know who sent letters by the postman?

Uncle Vernon glared at Harry, then looked down at the letter and began to read aloud:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Dursley,

We have never been introduced, but I am sure you have heard a great deal from Harry about my son Ron.

As Harry might have told you, the final of the Quidditch World Cup takes place this Monday night, and my husband, Arthur, has just managed to get prime tickets through his connections at the Department of Magical Games and Sports.

I do hope you will allow us to take Harry to the match, as this really is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity; Britain hasn't hosted the Cup for thirty years, and tickets are extremely hard to come by. We would of course be glad to have Harry stay for the remainder of the summer holidays, and to see him safely onto the train back to school.

It would be best for Harry to send us your answer as quickly as possible in the normal way, because the Muggle postman has never delivered to our house, and I am not sure he even knows where it is.

Hoping to see Harry soon,

Yours sincerely,

Molly Weasley

P.S. I do hope we've put enough stamps on.

Uncle Vernon finished reading, put his hand back into his breast pocket, and drew out something else.

“Look at this,” he growled.

He held up the envelope in which Mrs. Weasley's letter had come, and Harry had to fight down a laugh. Every bit of it was covered in stamps except for a square inch on the front, into which Mrs. Weasley had squeezed the Dursleys' address in minute writing.

“She did put enough stamps on, then,” said Harry, trying to sound as though Mrs. Weasley's was a mistake anyone could make. His uncle's eyes flashed.

“The postman noticed,” he said through gritted teeth. “Very interested to know where this letter came from, he was. That's why he rang the doorbell. Seemed to think it was *funny*.”

Harry didn't say anything. Other people might not understand why Uncle Vernon was making a fuss about too many stamps, but Harry had lived with the Dursleys too long not to know how touchy they were about anything even slightly out of the ordinary. Their worst fear was that someone would find out that they were connected (however distantly) with people like Mrs. Weasley.

Uncle Vernon was still glaring at Harry, who tried to keep his expression neutral. If he didn't do or say anything stupid, he might just be in for the treat of a lifetime. He waited for Uncle Vernon to say something, but he merely continued to glare. Harry decided to

break the silence.

“So — can I go then?” he asked.

A slight spasm crossed Uncle Vernon’s large purple face. The mustache bristled. Harry thought he knew what was going on behind the mustache: a furious battle as two of Uncle Vernon’s most fundamental instincts came into conflict. Allowing Harry to go would make Harry happy, something Uncle Vernon had struggled against for thirteen years. On the other hand, allowing Harry to disappear to the Weasleys’ for the rest of the summer would get rid of him two weeks earlier than anyone could have hoped, and Uncle Vernon hated having Harry in the house. To give himself thinking time, it seemed, he looked down at Mrs. Weasley’s letter again.

“Who is this woman?” he said, staring at the signature with distaste.

“You’ve seen her,” said Harry. “She’s my friend Ron’s mother, she was meeting him off the Hog — off the school train at the end of last term.”

He had almost said “Hogwarts Express,” and that was a sure way to get his uncle’s temper up. Nobody ever mentioned the name of Harry’s school aloud in the Dursley household.

Uncle Vernon screwed up his enormous face as though trying to remember something very unpleasant.

“Dumpy sort of woman?” he growled finally. “Load of children with red hair?”

Harry frowned. He thought it was a bit rich of Uncle Vernon to call anyone “dumpy,” when his own son, Dudley, had finally achieved what he’d been threatening to do since the age of three, and become

wider than he was tall.

Uncle Vernon was perusing the letter again.

“Quidditch,” he muttered under his breath. “*Quidditch* — what is this rubbish?”

Harry felt a second stab of annoyance.

“It’s a sport,” he said shortly. “Played on broom —”

“All right, all right!” said Uncle Vernon loudly. Harry saw, with some satisfaction, that his uncle looked vaguely panicky. Apparently his nerves couldn’t stand the sound of the word “broomsticks” in his living room. He took refuge in perusing the letter again. Harry saw his lips form the words “send us your answer . . . in the normal way.” He scowled.

“What does she mean, ‘the normal way’?” he spat.

“Normal for us,” said Harry, and before his uncle could stop him, he added, “you know, owl post. That’s what’s normal for wizards.”

Uncle Vernon looked as outraged as if Harry had just uttered a disgusting swearword. Shaking with anger, he shot a nervous look through the window, as though expecting to see some of the neighbors with their ears pressed against the glass.

“How many times do I have to tell you not to mention that unnaturalness under my roof?” he hissed, his face now a rich plum color. “You stand there, in the clothes Petunia and I have put on your ungrateful back —”

“Only after Dudley finished with them,” said Harry coldly, and indeed, he was dressed in a sweatshirt so large for him that he had had to roll back the sleeves five times so as to be able to use his hands, and which fell past the knees of his extremely baggy jeans.

“I will not be spoken to like that!” said Uncle Vernon, trembling with rage.

But Harry wasn’t going to stand for this. Gone were the days when he had been forced to take every single one of the Dursleys’ stupid rules. He wasn’t following Dudley’s diet, and he wasn’t going to let Uncle Vernon stop him from going to the Quidditch World Cup, not if he could help it. Harry took a deep, steadying breath and then said, “Okay, I can’t see the World Cup. Can I go now, then? Only I’ve got a letter to Sirius I want to finish. You know — my godfather.”

He had done it. He had said the magic words. Now he watched the purple recede blotchily from Uncle Vernon’s face, making it look like badly mixed black currant ice cream.

“You’re — you’re writing to him, are you?” said Uncle Vernon, in a would-be calm voice — but Harry had seen the pupils of his tiny eyes contract with sudden fear.

“Well — yeah,” said Harry, casually. “It’s been a while since he heard from me, and, you know, if he doesn’t, he might start thinking something’s wrong.”

He stopped there to enjoy the effect of these words. He could almost see the cogs working under Uncle Vernon’s thick, dark, neatly parted hair. If he tried to stop Harry writing to Sirius, Sirius would think Harry was being mistreated. If he told Harry he couldn’t go to the Quidditch World Cup, Harry would write and tell Sirius, who would *know* Harry was being mistreated. There was only one thing for Uncle Vernon to do. Harry could see the conclusion forming in his uncle’s mind as though the great mustached face were transparent. Harry tried not to smile, to keep his own face as blank as possible.

And then —

“Well, all right then. You can go to this ruddy . . . this stupid . . . this World Cup thing. You write and tell these — these *Weasleys* they’re to pick you up, mind. I haven’t got time to go dropping you off all over the country. And you can spend the rest of the summer there. And you can tell your — your godfather . . . tell him . . . tell him you’re going.”

“Okay then,” said Harry brightly.

He turned and walked toward the living room door, fighting the urge to jump into the air and whoop. He was going . . . he was going to the Weasleys’, he was going to watch the Quidditch World Cup!

Outside in the hall he nearly ran into Dudley, who had been lurking behind the door, clearly hoping to overhear Harry being told off. He looked shocked to see the broad grin on Harry’s face.

“That was an *excellent* breakfast, wasn’t it?” said Harry. “I feel really full, don’t you?”

Laughing at the astonished look on Dudley’s face, Harry took the stairs three at a time, and hurled himself back into his bedroom.

The first thing he saw was that Hedwig was back. She was sitting in her cage, staring at Harry with her enormous amber eyes, and clicking her beak in the way that meant she was annoyed about something. Exactly what was annoying her became apparent almost at once.

“OUCH!” said Harry as what appeared to be a small, gray, feathery tennis ball collided with the side of his head. Harry massaged the spot furiously, looking up to see what had hit him, and saw a minute owl, small enough to fit into the palm of his hand,

whizzing excitedly around the room like a loose firework. Harry then realized that the owl had dropped a letter at his feet. Harry bent down, recognized Ron's handwriting, then tore open the envelope. Inside was a hastily scribbled note.

Harry — DAD GOT THE TICKETS — Ireland versus Bulgaria, Monday night. Mum's writing to the Muggles to ask you to stay. They might already have the letter, I don't know how fast Muggle post is. Thought I'd send this with Pig anyway.

Harry stared at the word "Pig," then looked up at the tiny owl now zooming around the light fixture on the ceiling. He had never seen anything that looked less like a pig. Maybe he couldn't read Ron's writing. He went back to the letter:

We're coming for you whether the Muggles like it or not, you can't miss the World Cup, only Mum and Dad reckon it's better if we pretend to ask their permission first. If they say yes, send Pig back with your answer pronto, and we'll come and get you at five o'clock on Sunday. If they say no, send Pig back pronto and we'll come and get you at five o'clock on Sunday anyway.

Hermione's arriving this afternoon. Percy's started work — the Department of International Magical Cooperation. Don't mention anything about Abroad while you're here unless you want the pants bored off you.

See you soon —

A stylized, handwritten signature of the name "Ron" in black ink.

“Calm down!” Harry said as the small owl flew low over his head, twittering madly with what Harry could only assume was pride at having delivered the letter to the right person. “Come here, I need you to take my answer back!”

The owl fluttered down on top of Hedwig’s cage. Hedwig looked coldly up at it, as though daring it to try and come any closer.

Harry seized his eagle-feather quill once more, grabbed a fresh piece of parchment, and wrote:

Ron, it's all okay, the Muggles say I can come. See you five o'clock tomorrow. Can't wait.

A stylized, handwritten signature of the name "Harry" in black ink.

He folded this note up very small, and with immense difficulty, tied it to the tiny owl’s leg as it hopped on the spot with excitement. The moment the note was secure, the owl was off again; it zoomed out of the window and out of sight.

Harry turned to Hedwig.

“Feeling up to a long journey?” he asked her.

Hedwig hooted in a dignified sort of a way.

“Can you take this to Sirius for me?” he said, picking up his letter. “Hang on . . . I just want to finish it.”

He unfolded the parchment and hastily added a postscript.

If you want to contact me, I'll be at my friend Ron Weasley's for the rest of the summer. His dad's got us tickets for the Quidditch World Cup!

The letter finished, he tied it to Hedwig's leg; she kept unusually still, as though determined to show him how a real post owl should behave.

"I'll be at Ron's when you get back, all right?" Harry told her.

She nipped his finger affectionately, then, with a soft swooshing noise, spread her enormous wings and soared out of the open window.

Harry watched her out of sight, then crawled under his bed, wrenched up the loose floorboard, and pulled out a large chunk of birthday cake. He sat there on the floor eating it, savoring the happiness that was flooding through him. He had cake, and Dudley had nothing but grapefruit; it was a bright summer's day, he would be leaving Privet Drive tomorrow, his scar felt perfectly normal again, and he was going to watch the Quidditch World Cup. It was hard, just now, to feel worried about anything — even Lord Voldemort.

Die Uitnodiging

Teen die tyd dat Harry in die kombuis kom, sit die drie Dursleys alreeds om die tafel. Nie een van hulle kyk op toe hy inkom en gaan sit nie. Oom Vernon se groot rooi gesig is versteek agter die oggend se *Daaglikse Nuus* en tant Petunia is besig om 'n pomelo in vier te sny, haar lippe platgetrek oor haar perdetande.

Dudley lyk vies en dikbek en om die een of ander rede is dit asof hy meer plek as gewoonlik opneem. Dit sê veel, want gewoonlik sit hy een hele kant van die vierkantige tafel vol. Toe tant Petunia 'n kwart van die onversoete pomelo op Dudley se bord neersit met 'n trillende "Hierso, Diddielief", gluur Dudley haar aan. Sy lewe het 'n uiters onaangename wending geneem sedert hy vir die somervakansie met sy rapport vir die einde van die skooljaar huis toe gekom het.

Soos gewoonlik het oom Vernon en tant Petunia dit reggekry om ver-skonings vir sy swak punte uit te dink; tant Petunia staan daarop dat Dudley 'n hoogs begaafde seun is wie se onderwysers hom nie verstaan nie, terwyl oom Vernon volhou dat hy in elk geval nie "een van daardie boekerige sissies" vir 'n seun wil hê nie. Die aantygings in die rapport dat Dudley 'n boelie is, het hulle ook afgemaak – "Hy's 'n lewendige klein seuntjie, maar hy sal nie 'n vlieg kwaad aandoen nie!" het tant Petunia in trane gesê.

Onderaan die rapport was egter 'n paar goedgekose opmerkings deur die skoolverpleegster wat selfs tant Petunia en oom Vernon nie kon weg-redeneer nie. Hoe tant Petunia ook al volhou dat Dudley groot gebou is, dat dit bloot babavet is en dat hy 'n groeiende seun is wat genoeg kos moet kry, die feit bly staan dat die skool se uitrusters nie broeke voorsien wat groot genoeg vir hom is nie. Die skoolverpleegster het gesien wat tant Petunia se oë – so skerp wanneer dit kom by vingermerke teen haar skitterskoon mure en by wat die bure alles doen – weier om te sien: dat Dudley hoegenaamd nie ekstra kos nodig het nie; dat hy reeds feitlik net so groot en swaar soos 'n jong moordvis is.

Dus – na vele woedebuie, argumente wat Harry se kamervloer laat be-we het en baie trane van tant Petunia – het die nuwe stelsel begin. Die

diertkaart wat deur Smeltings se verpleegster gestuur is, is teen die yskas vasgeplak. Al Dudley se gunstelingrommelkos – gaskoeldranke en koeke, sjokoladestafies en burgers – is uitgegooi en die yskas is gelaai met vrugte en groente en al daardie goed wat oom Vernon “haaskos” noem. Om Dudley beter oor alles te laat voel, het tant Petunia daarop aangedring dat die hele gesin die dieet volg. Sy gee nou ’n kwartpomelo vir Harry aan. Hy let op dat syne baie kleiner as Dudley s’n is. Tant Petunia dink skynbaar dat dit die beste manier is om Dudley se moreel hoog te hou: om seker te maak dat hy ten minste meer as Harry kry om te eet.

Tant Petunia weet egter nie wat daar bo onder die los vloerplank weggesteek is nie. Sy het nie ’n idee dat Harry glad nie die dieet volg nie. Die oomblik toe Harry besef het dat hy die hele somervakansie op wortelstokkies sal moet oorlewe, het hy vir Hedwig met pleidooie om hulp na sy vriende gestuur. Hulle het wonderlik gereageer. Hedwig het van Hermien se huis af teruggekom met ’n groot doos vol suikervrye snoepgoed (Hermien se ouers is tandartse). Hagrid, Hogwarts se boswagter, het ’n sak vol van sy eie tuisgemaakte rotskoekies gestuur (Harry het nog nie hieraan geraak nie; hy het te veel ondervinding van Hagrid se kookkuns). Mev. Weasley het egter die gesin se uil, Errol, met ’n tamaai vrugtekoek en ’n verskeidenheid pasteitjies gestuur. Die arme Errol, wat bejaard en verwaak is, het ’n volle vyf dae geneem om van die reis te herstel. Daarna, op Harry se verjaardag (wat die Dursleys heeltemal geïgnoreer het), het hy vier manjifieke verjaardagkoeke gekry, een elk van Ron, Hermien, Hagrid en Sirius. Harry het nog twee van hulle oor. Hy eet sy pomelo dus sonder om te kla, want hy weet dat sy ware ontbyt daar bo op hom wag.

Oom Vernon sit sy koerant met ’n diep snuif van misnoeë neer en gluur na sy eie skyf pomelo.

“Is dit al?” sê hy grimmig vir tant Petunia.

Tant Petunia gee hom ’n kwaai kyk en knik dan veelbetekenend na Dudley wat sy eie pomelokwart reeds opgeëet het en met ’n baie suur blik in sy klein varkogies na Harry s’n staar.

Oom Vernon slaak ’n yslike sug wat sy groot borselsnor deurmekaar waai en tel sy lepel op.

Die voordeurklok lui. Oom Vernon hys homself uit sy stoel en loop deur die portaal. Terwyl sy ma met die ketel doenig is, steel Dudley, so vinnig soos blits, die res van oom Vernon se pomelo.

Harry hoor hoe iemand by die deur praat en lag, en oom Vernon se kortaf antwoord. Toe gaan die voordeur toe en die geluid van papier wat geskeur word, kom uit die portaal.

Tant Petunia sit die teepot op die tafel neer en kyk nuuskierig om haar rond om te sien waarheen oom Vernon verdwyn het. Sy hoef nie lank te wag om uit te vind nie, want skaars ’n minuut later is hy terug. Hy lyk briesend kwaad.

“Jy,” blaf hy vir Harry. “Sitkamer toe. Dadelik.”

Terwyl Harry verward wonder wat op aarde hy nou weer gedoen het, staan hy op en volg oom Vernon uit die kombuis tot in die kamer langs-aan. Oom Vernon maak die deur hard agter hulle toe.

“So,” sê hy terwyl hy na die vuurherd stap en omdraai om na Harry te kyk soos een wat op die punt is om hom te arresteer. “So.”

Harry brand om te sê, “So wat?”, maar hy voel dat oom Vernon se humeur nie so vroeg in die oggend beproef moet word nie, veral nie wanneer dit reeds weens gebrek aan kos onder kwaai stres is nie. Hy lyk dus beleef en verward.

“Dit het so pas gekom,” sê oom Vernon. Hy swaai ’n stuk pers skryfpapier voor Harry rond. “’n Brief. Oor jou.”

Nou is Harry nog meer verward. Wie sal tog oor hom aan oom Vernon skryf? Wie ken hy wat briewe deur die pos sal stuur?

Oom Vernon gluur na Harry, dan kyk hy weer af na die brief en begin om dit hardop voor te lees:

Geagte mnr. en mev. Dursley,

Ons het nog nie ontmoet nie, maar ek is seker dat julle reeds baie oor my seun Ron van Harry gehoor het.

Soos Harry waarskynlik vir julle vertel het, vind die eindstryd om die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker volgende Maandagaand plaas en my man, Arthur, het daarin geslaag om prima kaartjies deur sy kontakte by die Departement van Magiese Sport en Ontspanning te kry.

Ek hoop regtig dat julle sal toelaat dat ons vir Harry na die wedstryd neem, aangesien dit werklik ’n eenmalige ervaring is; Brittanje was dertig jaar gelede laas gasheer vir die Beker en kaartjies is ontsettend moeilik bekombaar. Ons sal Harry natuurlik baie graag vir die res van die somervakansie by ons wil hou en sal ook seker maak dat hy die trein terug skool toe betyds haal.

Dit sal die beste wees as Harry jul antwoord so gou moontlik op die gewone manier stuur, want die Moggels se posman het nog nooit by ons huis afgelewer nie en ek dink nie hy weet waar dit is nie.

Ons hoop dat ons vir Harry spoedig sal sien,

Die uwe,

Molly Weasley

Ns. Ek hoop ons het genoeg seëls opgeplak.

Toe oom Vernon klaar geles het, steek hy sy hand terug in sy hemsak en haal iets anders uit.

“Kyk hierna,” grom hy.

Hy hou die koevert waarin mev. Weasley se brief was in die lug en Harry sukkel om nie te lag nie. Elke kolletjie op die koevert is toegeplak

met seëls, behalwe 'n stuk of vier vierkante sentimeter voorop waar mev. Weasley die Dursleys se adres in piepklein letters geskryf het.

“Sy het darem genoeg seëls opgeplak,” sê Harry en probeer klink asof mev. Weasley se fout deur absoluut enigiemand gemaak kan word. Sy oom se oë blits.

“Die posman het lont geruik,” sê hy deur geklemde kake. “Baie geïnteresseerd in waarvandaan hierdie brief kom. Dis hoekom hy die deurklok gelui het. Het gedink dis *eienaardig*.”

Harry sê niks. Ander mense sal dalk nie verstaan hoekom oom Vernon so 'n bohaai oor te veel seëls maak nie, maar Harry woon al lank genoeg by die Dursleys om te weet hoe gevoelig hulle oor alles is wat net enigstins buitengewoon is. Hul ergste vrees is dat iemand sal agterkom dat hulle (hoe min ook al) iets te doen het met iemand soos mev. Weasley.

Oom Vernon gluur nog steeds na Harry, wat sukkel om sy gesigsuitdrukking neutraal te hou. As hy nie iets doms sê of doen nie, lê die fees van sy lewe dalk voor. Hy wag dat oom Vernon iets moet sê, maar hy staan bloot na Harry. Harry besluit om die stilte te verbreek.

“Dus – kan ek gaan?” vra hy.

Oom Vernon se groot pers gesig vertrek effens. Sy snor bewe. Harry dink hy weet wat agter daardie snor aan die gang is: 'n vreeslike stryd soos twee van oom Vernon se mees basiese instinkte direk in botsing kom. As hy vir Harry sou toelaat om te gaan, sal dit vir Harry gelukkig maak, iets waarteen oom Vernon al vir dertien jaar baklei. Aan die ander kant, as Harry vir die res van die somervakansie na die Weasleys sou gaan, is hulle twee weke vroeër as wat hulle ooit kon hoop van hom ontslae en oom Vernon haat dit om vir Harry in die huis te hê. Om homself tyd te gee om te dink, staan hy weer eens na mev. Weasley se brief.

“Wie is hierdie vrou?” sê hy terwyl hy die handtekening misnoeg bekijk.

“Oom het haar al gesien,” sê Harry. “Sy's my vriend Ron se ma. Sy het hom einde laas kwartaal by die Hog– by die skooltrein kom haal.”

Hy het so amper “Hogwarts Express” gesê, en dit is 'n seker manier om sy oom die hoenders in te maak. Niemand in die Dursleys se huis noem ooit die naam van Harry se skool hardop nie.

Oom Vernon skroef sy tamaai gesig op asof hy iets ergs onplesierigs probeer onthou.

“Dikkerige vroumens?” grom hy uiteindelik. “Spul kinders met rooi hare?”

Harry ironiseer. Hy voel dat dit regtig 'n bietjie vermetel van oom Vernon is om iemand anders “dikkerig” te noem, terwyl sy eie seun dit uiteindelik reggekry het om breër te wees as wat hy lank is, iets wat al dreig vandat hy drie is.

Weer bekijk oom Vernon die brief.

“Kwiddiek,” mompel hy binnensmonds. “Kwiddiek – watse nonsens is dit?”

Weer vervies Harry hom.

“Dis ’n sportsoort,” sê hy kortaf. “Dit word op besem–”

“Goed, goed!” sê oom Vernon hard. Harry kry lekker toe hy sien dat sy oom ietwat paniekerig lyk. Skynbaar kan sy senuwees nie die klank van die woord “besemstokke” in sy woonkamer verdra nie. Weer neem hy sy toevlug tot die brief. Harry sien hoe sy lippe die woorde “stuur jou antwoord so gou moontlik op die gewone manier” vorm en hoe hy misnoeg frons.

“Wat bedoel sy met *die gewone manier*?” spoeg hy.

“Gewoon vir ons,” sê Harry en voor sy oom hom kan keer, voeg hy by, “oom weet, uilepos. Dis wat vir towenaars gewoon is.”

Oom Vernon lyk so verontwaardig asof Harry pas ’n vreeslike vloekwoord gesê het. Hy bewee van woede en kyk senuagtig deur die venster asof hy verwag om van sy bure met hul ore vasgedruk teen die ruite te sien staan.

“Hoeveel keer moet ek nog vir jou sê om nie van daardie onnatuurlikheid onder my dak te praat nie?” sis hy en sy gesig is nou ’n ryk pruimkleur. “Jy staan daar in die klere wat ek en Petunia aan jou ondankbare bas getrek het –”

“Eers nadat Dudley daarmee klaar was,” sê Harry koel. Hy dra inderdaad ’n top wat so groot is dat hy die moue vyf keer moet omrol om sy hande te kan gebruik en wat tot by die knieë van sy ontsettend sakkerige jeans hang.

“Ek sal nie toelaat dat jy so met my praat nie!” sê oom Vernon en hy bewee van woede.

Dit gaan Harry egter nie duld nie. Die dae toe hy verplig was om elkeen van die Dursleys se simpel reëls na te kom, is verby. Hy volg nie Dudley se dieet nie en hy gaan ook nie toelaat dat oom Vernon ’n stokkie voor die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker steek nie, nie as hy dit kan verhelp nie.

Harry trek sy asem diep in om tot bedaring te kom, en toe sê hy, “Nou maar goed, dan gaan ek nie na die Wêreldbeker nie. Kan ek maar loop? Ek is besig met ’n brief aan Sirius wat ek graag wil klaarmaak. Oom weet – my peetpa.”

Hy het dit reggekry. Hy het die towerwoorde gesê. Nou sien hy hoe die pers kleur kol-kol uit oom Vernon se gesig verdwyn sodat hy soos ’n sleg geroerde swartbessieroomys lyk.

“Jy – jy skryf vir hom?” sê oom Vernon in ’n stem wat veronderstel is om kalm te klink – maar Harry sien hoe die pupille van sy klein ogies skielik saamtrek van vrees.

“Wel – ja,” sê Harry ongeërg. “Hy het lank laas van my gehoor, en oom weet, as hy niks hoor nie, kan hy dalk begin dink dat daar fout is.”

Hy hou net daar op om eers die uitwerking van hierdie woorde te getref. Hy kan amper sien hoe die ratte onder oom Vernon se dik, donker, netjies gekamde hare draai. As hy sou probeer om 'n stokkie voor Harry se skryfery aan Sirius te steek, kan Sirius dalk dink dat Harry sleg behandel word. As hy vir Harry sou sê dat hy nie na die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker mag gaan nie, sal Harry dit vir Sirius vertel en dan sal Sirius weet dat Harry sleg behandel word. Oom Vernon kan net een ding doen. Harry kan sien hoe die besluit vorm aanneem in sy gedagtes asof die groot besnoorde gesig deurskynend is. Harry probeer om nie te glimlag nie, om sy eie gesig so uitdrukkingloos moontlik te hou. En toe –

“Wel, goed dan. Jy kan na hierdie verbrande . . . hierdie simpel . . . hierdie Wêreldbeker-affêre gaan. Skryf en sê vir daardie – daardie Weasleys hulle moet jou hier kom haal. Ek het nie die tyd om jou die wêreld vol af te laai nie. Dan bly jy sommer die res van die vakansie daar. En sê vir jou – jou peetpa . . . sê vir hom . . . sê hom dat jy mag gaan.”

“Oukei,” sê Harry in sy skik.

Toe hy omdraai en na die woonkamerdeur stap, moet hy hard daarteen stry om nie die lug in te spring en hoera te skree nie. Hy gaan . . . hy gaan na die Weasleys toe, hy gaan die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker bywoon!

Buite in die portaal loop hy hom amper vas in Dudley wat agter die deur gestaan het, duidelik in die hoop dat hy sal hoor hoe Harry afgeselsel word. Hy lyk geskok toe hy die breë glimlag op Harry se gesig sien.

“Dit was 'n voortreflike ontbyt, nè?” sê Harry. “Ek is regtig vol, en jy?”

Terwyl hy oor die verblufte uitdrukking op Dudley se gesig lag, klim Harry die trappe drie-drie uit en val by sy kamer in.

Die eerste ding wat hy sien, is dat Hedwig terug is. Sy sit in haar koue en staar met haar enorme amber oë na Harry terwyl sy haar snawel klik op 'n manier wat beteken dat sy omgekras is oor iets. Presies wat haar ontstel, raak feitlik onmiddellik duidelik.

“EINA!” sê Harry.

Iets wat na 'n klein grys tennisbal vol vere lyk, het die kant van Harry se kop getref. Harry vryf sy kop verwoed terwyl hy rondkyk om te sien wat dit was. Dan sien hy 'n piepklein uiltjie, so klein dat dit in die palm van sy hand sal pas, wat opgewonde in die vertrek rondsweef soos 'n los vuurwerk. Harry besef nou dat die uil 'n brief voor sy voete neergegooi het. Hy buk, herken Ron se handskrif en skeur die koevert oop. Binnein is 'n haastig geskrewe nota.

Harry – PA HET KAARTJIES GEKRY – Ierland teen Bulgarye, Maandagaand. Ma gaan vir die Moggels skryf en vra of jy kan kom kuier. Hulle het die brief dalk al gekry, ek weet nie hoe vinnig die Moggelpos is nie. Gedink ek sal in elk geval vir Pig hiermee stuur.

Harry staar na die woord "Pig" en kyk dan op na die klein uiltjie wat nou om en om die lampskerm bo teen die plafon vlieg. Hy het nog nooit iets gesien wat minder na 'n vark lyk nie. Dalk is dit net dat hy Ron se handskrif nie so lekker uitmaak nie. Hy kyk weer na die brief.

Ons kom jou haal of die Moggels nou daarvan hou of nie, jy mag die Wêreldbeker eenvoudig nie misloop nie, dis net dat Ma en Pa dink dis beter as ons maak of ons eers vra. As hulle ja sê, moet jy dadelik vir Pig met jou antwoord terugstuur, dan kom haal ons jou Sondag om vyfuur. As hulle nee sê, moet jy vir Pig in elk geval terugstuur, dan kom haal ons jou nog steeds Sondag om vyfuur.

Hermien kom vanmiddag. Percy het begin werk – die Departement van Internasionale Magiese Samewerking. Moet niks oor Oorsee sê terwyl jy hier is nie, tensy jy na 'n spul flippen vervelige praatjies wil luister.

Sien jou gou – Ron.

"Bedaar!" sê Harry toe die klein uiltjie met 'n opgewonde gekwetter laag oor sy kop vlieg. Harry dink dat hy seker trots is omdat hy die brief by die regte persoon afgelewer het. "Kom hier, jy moet my antwoord terugneem!"

Die uiltjie fladder tot op Hedwig se kou. Hedwig gluur hom koud aan asof sy hom wil uitdaag om nader te kom.

Harry tel sy arendveerpen op sowel as 'n skoon stuk perkament en skryf:

Ron, dis oukei, die Moggels het gesê ek kan kom. Sien jou môre om vyfuur. Kan nie wag nie.

Harry.

Hy vou die briefie baie klein op en bind dit met groot moeite aan die uiltjie se been vas terwyl dié opgewonde op en af hop. Die oomblik dat die nota vas is, zoem die uiltjie deur die venster en verdwyn uit sig.

Harry draai na Hedwig.

"Sien jy kans vir 'n lang reis?" vra hy vir haar.

Hedwig hoe-hoe op haar waardige manier.

"Sal jy dit na Sirius toe neem?" sê hy en tel die brief op. "Wag eers . . . ek maak net gou klaar."

Hy vou die perkament oop en voeg 'n haastige naskrif by.

As jy my wil kontak, ek gaan vir die res van die somervakansie by my vriend Ron Weasley wees. Sy pa het vir ons kaartjies vir die Kwid-diek-Wêreldbeker gekry!

Toe die brief klaar is, bind hy dit aan Hedwig se been vas; sy sit onge-
woon stil asof sy vir hom wil wys hoe 'n ware posuil haar behoort te ge-
duld.

“Ek gaan by Ron wees wanneer jy terugkom, oukei?” sê Harry vir
haar.

Sy pik hom liefdevol aan die vinger en toe vou sy haar vlerke met 'n
sagte geruis oop en seil deur die venster.

Harry kyk haar agterna tot sy wegraak, toe kruip hy onder sy bed in,
lig die los vloerplank op en haal 'n groot stuk verjaardagkoek uit. Hy sit
dit op die vloer en eet terwyl 'n wonderlik gelukkige gevoel deur sy lig-
gaam vloei. Hy het koek terwyl Dudley niks anders as pomelo het nie, dit
is 'n helder somerdag, hy gaan môre weg van Ligusterlaan af, sy litteken
voel weer nes altyd en hy gaan na die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker toe. Dit is
onmoontlik om nou oor enigiets bekommerd te wees – selfs nie oor die
heer Woldemort nie.

CHAPTER FOUR



BACK TO THE BURROW

By twelve o'clock the next day, Harry's school trunk was packed with his school things and all his most prized possessions — the Invisibility Cloak he had inherited from his father, the broomstick he had gotten from Sirius, the enchanted map of Hogwarts he had been given by Fred and George Weasley last year. He had emptied his hiding place under the loose floorboard of all food, double-checked every nook and cranny of his bedroom for forgotten spellbooks or quills, and taken down the chart on the wall counting down the days to September the first, on which he liked to cross off the days remaining until his return to Hogwarts.

The atmosphere inside number four, Privet Drive was extremely tense. The imminent arrival at their house of an assortment of wizards was making the Dursleys uptight and irritable. Uncle Vernon had

looked downright alarmed when Harry informed him that the Weasleys would be arriving at five o'clock the very next day.

"I hope you told them to dress properly, these people," he snarled at once. "I've seen the sort of stuff your lot wear. They'd better have the decency to put on normal clothes, that's all."

Harry felt a slight sense of foreboding. He had rarely seen Mr. or Mrs. Weasley wearing anything that the Dursleys would call "normal." Their children might don Muggle clothing during the holidays, but Mr. and Mrs. Weasley usually wore long robes in varying states of shabbiness. Harry wasn't bothered about what the neighbors would think, but he was anxious about how rude the Dursleys might be to the Weasleys if they turned up looking like their worst idea of wizards.

Uncle Vernon had put on his best suit. To some people, this might have looked like a gesture of welcome, but Harry knew it was because Uncle Vernon wanted to look impressive and intimidating. Dudley, on the other hand, looked somehow diminished. This was not because the diet was at last taking effect, but due to fright. Dudley had emerged from his last encounter with a fully-grown wizard with a curly pig's tail poking out of the seat of his trousers, and Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had had to pay for its removal at a private hospital in London. It wasn't altogether surprising, therefore, that Dudley kept running his hand nervously over his backside, and walking sideways from room to room, so as not to present the same target to the enemy.

Lunch was an almost silent meal. Dudley didn't even protest at the food (cottage cheese and grated celery). Aunt Petunia wasn't eating

anything at all. Her arms were folded, her lips were pursed, and she seemed to be chewing her tongue, as though biting back the furious diatribe she longed to throw at Harry.

“They’ll be driving, of course?” Uncle Vernon barked across the table.

“Er,” said Harry.

He hadn’t thought of that. How *were* the Weasleys going to pick him up? They didn’t have a car anymore; the old Ford Anglia they had once owned was currently running wild in the Forbidden Forest at Hogwarts. But Mr. Weasley had borrowed a Ministry of Magic car last year; possibly he would do the same today?

“I think so,” said Harry.

Uncle Vernon snorted into his mustache. Normally, Uncle Vernon would have asked what car Mr. Weasley drove; he tended to judge other men by how big and expensive their cars were. But Harry doubted whether Uncle Vernon would have taken to Mr. Weasley even if he drove a Ferrari.

Harry spent most of the afternoon in his bedroom; he couldn’t stand watching Aunt Petunia peer out through the net curtains every few seconds, as though there had been a warning about an escaped rhinoceros. Finally, at a quarter to five, Harry went back downstairs and into the living room.

Aunt Petunia was compulsively straightening cushions. Uncle Vernon was pretending to read the paper, but his tiny eyes were not moving, and Harry was sure he was really listening with all his might for the sound of an approaching car. Dudley was crammed into an armchair, his porky hands beneath him, clamped firmly around his

bottom. Harry couldn't take the tension; he left the room and went and sat on the stairs in the hall, his eyes on his watch and his heart pumping fast from excitement and nerves.

But five o'clock came and then went. Uncle Vernon, perspiring slightly in his suit, opened the front door, peered up and down the street, then withdrew his head quickly.

"They're late!" he snarled at Harry.

"I know," said Harry. "Maybe — er — the traffic's bad, or something."

Ten past five . . . then a quarter past five . . . Harry was starting to feel anxious himself now. At half past, he heard Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia conversing in terse mutters in the living room.

"No consideration at all."

"We might've had an engagement."

"Maybe they think they'll get invited to dinner if they're late."

"Well, they most certainly won't be," said Uncle Vernon, and Harry heard him stand up and start pacing the living room. "They'll take the boy and go, there'll be no hanging around. That's if they're coming at all. Probably mistaken the day. I daresay *their kind* don't set much store by punctuality. Either that or they drive some tin-pot car that's broken d — AAAAAAAARRRRRRGH!"

Harry jumped up. From the other side of the living room door came the sounds of the three Dursleys scrambling, panic-stricken, across the room. Next moment Dudley came flying into the hall, looking terrified.

"What happened?" said Harry. "What's the matter?"

But Dudley didn't seem able to speak. Hands still clamped over

his buttocks, he waddled as fast as he could into the kitchen. Harry hurried into the living room.

Loud bangings and scrapings were coming from behind the Dursleys' boarded-up fireplace, which had a fake coal fire plugged in front of it.

"What is it?" gasped Aunt Petunia, who had backed into the wall and was staring, terrified, toward the fire. "What is it, Vernon?"

But they were left in doubt barely a second longer. Voices could be heard from inside the blocked fireplace.

"Ouch! Fred, no — go back, go back, there's been some kind of mistake — tell George not to — OUCH! George, no, there's no room, go back quickly and tell Ron —"

"Maybe Harry can hear us, Dad — maybe he'll be able to let us out —"

There was a loud hammering of fists on the boards behind the electric fire.

"Harry? Harry, can you hear us?"

The Dursleys rounded on Harry like a pair of angry wolverines.

"What is this?" growled Uncle Vernon. "What's going on?"

"They — they've tried to get here by Floo powder," said Harry, fighting a mad desire to laugh. "They can travel by fire — only you've blocked the fireplace — hang on —"

He approached the fireplace and called through the boards.

"Mr. Weasley? Can you hear me?"

The hammering stopped. Somebody inside the chimney piece said, "Shh!"

“Mr. Weasley, it’s Harry . . . the fireplace has been blocked up. You won’t be able to get through there.”

“Damn!” said Mr. Weasley’s voice. “What on earth did they want to block up the fireplace for?”

“They’ve got an electric fire,” Harry explained.

“Really?” said Mr. Weasley’s voice excitedly. “Eclectic, you say? With a *plug*? Gracious, I must see that. . . . Let’s think . . . ouch, Ron!”

Ron’s voice now joined the others’.

“What are we doing here? Has something gone wrong?”

“Oh no, Ron,” came Fred’s voice, very sarcastically. “No, this is exactly where we wanted to end up.”

“Yeah, we’re having the time of our lives here,” said George, whose voice sounded muffled, as though he was squashed against the wall.

“Boys, boys . . .” said Mr. Weasley vaguely. “I’m trying to think what to do. . . . Yes . . . only way . . . Stand back, Harry.”

Harry retreated to the sofa. Uncle Vernon, however, moved forward.

“Wait a moment!” he bellowed at the fire. “What exactly are you going to —”

BANG.

The electric fire shot across the room as the boarded-up fireplace burst outward, expelling Mr. Weasley, Fred, George, and Ron in a cloud of rubble and loose chippings. Aunt Petunia shrieked and fell backward over the coffee table; Uncle Vernon caught her before she hit the floor, and gaped, speechless, at the Weasleys, all of whom had

bright red hair, including Fred and George, who were identical to the last freckle.

“That’s better,” panted Mr. Weasley, brushing dust from his long green robes and straightening his glasses. “Ah — you must be Harry’s aunt and uncle!”

Tall, thin, and balding, he moved toward Uncle Vernon, his hand outstretched, but Uncle Vernon backed away several paces, dragging Aunt Petunia. Words utterly failed Uncle Vernon. His best suit was covered in white dust, which had settled in his hair and mustache and made him look as though he had just aged thirty years.

“Er — yes — sorry about that,” said Mr. Weasley, lowering his hand and looking over his shoulder at the blasted fireplace. “It’s all my fault. It just didn’t occur to me that we wouldn’t be able to get out at the other end. I had your fireplace connected to the Floo Network, you see — just for an afternoon, you know, so we could get Harry. Muggle fireplaces aren’t supposed to be connected, strictly speaking — but I’ve got a useful contact at the Floo Regulation Panel and he fixed it for me. I can put it right in a jiffy, though, don’t worry. I’ll light a fire to send the boys back, and then I can repair your fireplace before I Disapparate.”

Harry was ready to bet that the Dursleys hadn’t understood a single word of this. They were still gaping at Mr. Weasley, thunderstruck. Aunt Petunia staggered upright again and hid behind Uncle Vernon.

“Hello, Harry!” said Mr. Weasley brightly. “Got your trunk ready?”

“It’s upstairs,” said Harry, grinning back.

“We’ll get it,” said Fred at once. Winking at Harry, he and George left the room. They knew where Harry’s bedroom was, having once rescued him from it in the dead of night. Harry suspected that Fred and George were hoping for a glimpse of Dudley; they had heard a lot about him from Harry.

“Well,” said Mr. Weasley, swinging his arms slightly, while he tried to find words to break the very nasty silence. “Very — erm — very nice place you’ve got here.”

As the usually spotless living room was now covered in dust and bits of brick, this remark didn’t go down too well with the Dursleys. Uncle Vernon’s face purpled once more, and Aunt Petunia started chewing her tongue again. However, they seemed too scared to actually say anything.

Mr. Weasley was looking around. He loved everything to do with Muggles. Harry could see him itching to go and examine the television and the video recorder.

“They run off eckeltricity, do they?” he said knowledgeably. “Ah yes, I can see the plugs. I collect plugs,” he added to Uncle Vernon. “And batteries. Got a very large collection of batteries. My wife thinks I’m mad, but there you are.”

Uncle Vernon clearly thought Mr. Weasley was mad too. He moved ever so slightly to the right, screening Aunt Petunia from view, as though he thought Mr. Weasley might suddenly run at them and attack.

Dudley suddenly reappeared in the room. Harry could hear the clunk of his trunk on the stairs, and knew that the sounds had scared Dudley out of the kitchen. Dudley edged along the wall, gazing at Mr. Weasley with terrified eyes, and attempted to conceal himself behind

his mother and father. Unfortunately, Uncle Vernon's bulk, while sufficient to hide bony Aunt Petunia, was nowhere near enough to conceal Dudley.

"Ah, this is your cousin, is it, Harry?" said Mr. Weasley, taking another brave stab at making conversation.

"Yep," said Harry, "that's Dudley."

He and Ron exchanged glances and then quickly looked away from each other; the temptation to burst out laughing was almost overwhelming. Dudley was still clutching his bottom as though afraid it might fall off. Mr. Weasley, however, seemed genuinely concerned at Dudley's peculiar behavior. Indeed, from the tone of his voice when he next spoke, Harry was quite sure that Mr. Weasley thought Dudley was quite as mad as the Dursleys thought *he* was, except that Mr. Weasley felt sympathy rather than fear.

"Having a good holiday, Dudley?" he said kindly.

Dudley whimpered. Harry saw his hands tighten still harder over his massive backside.

Fred and George came back into the room carrying Harry's school trunk. They glanced around as they entered and spotted Dudley. Their faces cracked into identical evil grins.

"Ah, right," said Mr. Weasley. "Better get cracking then."

He pushed up the sleeves of his robes and took out his wand. Harry saw the Dursleys draw back against the wall as one.

"*Incendio!*" said Mr. Weasley, pointing his wand at the hole in the wall behind him.

Flames rose at once in the fireplace, crackling merrily as though they had been burning for hours. Mr. Weasley took a small drawstring

bag from his pocket, untied it, took a pinch of the powder inside, and threw it onto the flames, which turned emerald green and roared higher than ever.

“Off you go then, Fred,” said Mr. Weasley.

“Coming,” said Fred. “Oh no — hang on —”

A bag of sweets had spilled out of Fred’s pocket and the contents were now rolling in every direction — big, fat toffees in brightly colored wrappers.

Fred scrambled around, cramming them back into his pocket, then gave the Dursleys a cheery wave, stepped forward, and walked right into the fire, saying “the Burrow!” Aunt Petunia gave a little shuddering gasp. There was a whooshing sound, and Fred vanished.

“Right then, George,” said Mr. Weasley, “you and the trunk.”

Harry helped George carry the trunk forward into the flames and turn it onto its end so that he could hold it better. Then, with a second whoosh, George had cried “the Burrow!” and vanished too.

“Ron, you next,” said Mr. Weasley.

“See you,” said Ron brightly to the Dursleys. He grinned broadly at Harry, then stepped into the fire, shouted “the Burrow!” and disappeared.

Now Harry and Mr. Weasley alone remained.

“Well . . . ’bye then,” Harry said to the Dursleys.

They didn’t say anything at all. Harry moved toward the fire, but just as he reached the edge of the hearth, Mr. Weasley put out a hand and held him back. He was looking at the Dursleys in amazement.

“Harry said good-bye to you,” he said. “Didn’t you hear him?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Harry muttered to Mr. Weasley. “Honestly, I

don't care."

Mr. Weasley did not remove his hand from Harry's shoulder.

"You aren't going to see your nephew till next summer," he said to Uncle Vernon in mild indignation. "Surely you're going to say good-bye?"

Uncle Vernon's face worked furiously. The idea of being taught consideration by a man who had just blasted away half his living room wall seemed to be causing him intense suffering. But Mr. Weasley's wand was still in his hand, and Uncle Vernon's tiny eyes darted to it once, before he said, very resentfully, "Good-bye, then."

"See you," said Harry, putting one foot forward into the green flames, which felt pleasantly like warm breath. At that moment, however, a horrible gagging sound erupted behind him, and Aunt Petunia started to scream.

Harry wheeled around. Dudley was no longer standing behind his parents. He was kneeling beside the coffee table, and he was gagging and sputtering on a foot-long, purple, slimy thing that was protruding from his mouth. One bewildered second later, Harry realized that the foot-long thing was Dudley's tongue — and that a brightly colored toffee wrapper lay on the floor before him.

Aunt Petunia hurled herself onto the ground beside Dudley, seized the end of his swollen tongue, and attempted to wrench it out of his mouth; unsurprisingly, Dudley yelled and sputtered worse than ever, trying to fight her off. Uncle Vernon was bellowing and waving his arms around, and Mr. Weasley had to shout to make himself heard.

"Not to worry, I can sort him out!" he yelled, advancing on Dudley with his wand outstretched, but Aunt Petunia screamed worse than

ever and threw herself on top of Dudley, shielding him from Mr. Weasley.

“No, really!” said Mr. Weasley desperately. “It’s a simple process — it was the toffee — my son Fred — real practical joker — but it’s only an Engorgement Charm — at least, I think it is — please, I can correct it —”

But far from being reassured, the Dursleys became more panic-stricken; Aunt Petunia was sobbing hysterically, tugging Dudley’s tongue as though determined to rip it out; Dudley appeared to be suffocating under the combined pressure of his mother and his tongue; and Uncle Vernon, who had lost control completely, seized a china figure from on top of the sideboard and threw it very hard at Mr. Weasley, who ducked, causing the ornament to shatter in the blasted fireplace.

“Now really!” said Mr. Weasley angrily, brandishing his wand. “I’m trying to *help*!”

Bellowing like a wounded hippo, Uncle Vernon snatched up another ornament.

“Harry, go! Just go!” Mr. Weasley shouted, his wand on Uncle Vernon. “I’ll sort this out!”

Harry didn’t want to miss the fun, but Uncle Vernon’s second ornament narrowly missed his left ear, and on balance he thought it best to leave the situation to Mr. Weasley. He stepped into the fire, looking over his shoulder as he said “the Burrow!” His last fleeting glimpse of the living room was of Mr. Weasley blasting a third ornament out of Uncle Vernon’s hand with his wand, Aunt Petunia screaming and lying on top of Dudley, and Dudley’s tongue lolling

around like a great slimy python. But next moment Harry had begun to spin very fast, and the Dursleys' living room was whipped out of sight in a rush of emerald-green flames.

Terug na Die Konynenes

Teen twaalfuur die volgende dag is Harry se trommel gepak met sy skoolgoed en al sy kosbaarste besittings – die onsigbaarheidsmantel wat hy by sy pa geërf het, die besemstok wat Sirius vir hom gegee het en die betowerde kaart van Hogwarts wat Fred en George Weasley die vorige jaar vir hom gegee het. Hy het al die kos uit sy wegsteekplek onder die los vloerplank gehaal, elke hoekie en gaatjie in sy slaapkamer vir vergete towerboeke of veerpenne deursoek en ook die muurkaart afgehaal waarop hy die dae tot die eerste September afmerk, wanneer hy weer terug Hogwarts toe moet gaan.

Die atmosfeer in Ligusterlaan 4 is besonder gespanne. Die idee dat 'n bonte verskeidenheid towenaars enige oomblik by hul huis gaan opdaag, maak die Dursleys omgekrap en prikkelbaar. Oom Vernon het behoorlik ontsteld gelyk toe Harry vir hom sê dat die Weasleys die volgende dag om vyfuur daar sal wees.

“Ek hoop hulle trek ordentlik aan, daardie spul,” het hy onmiddellik gesnou. “Ek het al die goed gesien wat julle klomp dra. Hoop hulle het die ordentlikheid om gewone klere aan te trek.”

Harry het 'n effens nare voorgevoel. Hy het mnr. en mev. Weasley nog nie juis in klere gesien wat die Dursleys “gewoon” sal noem nie. Hul kinders mag dalk in die vakansie Moggelklere dra, maar mnr. en mev. Weasley dra gewoonlik lang, minder of meer verwaarloosde mantels. Harry gee regtig nie om wat die bure dink nie, maar die gedagte aan hoe ongeskik die Dursleys met die Weasleys sal wees as hulle lyk soos hul ergste voorstelling van towenaars, pla hom sommer baie.

Oom Vernon het sy beste pak klere aangetrek. Party mense sal dit as 'n verwelkomingsgebaar beskou, maar Harry weet dis omdat oom Vernon belangrik en intimiderend wil lyk. In teenstelling hiermee lyk Dudley kleiner. Dis nie oor die dieet uiteindelik begin werk het nie, maar uit vrees. Die vorige keer toe Dudley met 'n volwasse toenaar te doene gehad het, het hy met 'n krullerige varkstert wat deur sy broek gesteeke het daarvan afgekom en oom Vernon en tant Petunia moes betaal om dit by 'n privaat hospitaal in Londen te laat verwyder. Dit is dus nie snaaks dat

Dudley aanhoudend senuagtig oor sy agterwêreld vryf en sywaarts van vertrek tot vertrek skuifel om nie weer dieselfde teiken vir die vyand te wys nie.

Midagete is 'n stillerige affêre. Dudley maak nie eens beswaar oor die kos nie (maaskaas en gerasperde seldery). Tant Petunia eet hoegenaamd niks. Haar arms is gekruis, haar lippe is saamgepers en sy kou haar tong asof sy die ergerlike woorde waarmee sy vir Harry wil uitskel, moet terugby.

"Hulle ry darem seker, of hoe?" blaf oom Vernon oor die tafel.

"H'n," sê Harry.

Hy het nog glad nie hieraan gedink nie. Hoe gaan die Weasleys hom kom jaal? Hulle het nie eens meer 'n kar nie; die ou Ford Anglia wat hulle vroeër gehad het, hardloop wild in die Verbode Woud by Hogwarts rond. Die vorige jaar het mnr. Weasley 'n motor by die Ministerie vir Toewerkings geleen; dalk doen hy dit vanjaar weer?

"El dink so," sê Harry.

Oom Vernon snork in sy snor. Gewoonlik sou oom Vernon vra watter soort motor mnr. Weasley het; hy oordeel mense altyd aan hoe groot en duur hul motors is. Harry twyfel egter of oom Vernon van mnr. Weasley sal hou, selfs al ry hy in 'n Ferrari.

Harry bly die grootste deel van die middag in sy slaapkamer; hy kan dit nie verduur om te sien hoe tant Petunia elke nou en dan deur die kantgrdyne loer asof daar 'n waarskuwing oor 'n ontsnapte renoster was nie. Uiteindelik, teen kwart voor vyf, loop Harry ondertoe en na die woonkamer toe.

Tant Petunia is besig om die kussings kompulsief reg te trek. Oom Vernon maak of hy koerant lees, maar sy klein ogies roer nie en Harry is seker dat hy fyn luister vir die geluid van 'n aankomende voertuig. Dudley sit ingedruk in 'n leunstoel, sy varkhande onder hom om sy sitvlak geklen. Harry kan die spanning nie meer hanteer nie; hy stap uit en gaan sit op die trappe in die portaal met sy oë op sy horlosie en 'n hart wat van opwinding en senuwees woes klop.

Vyfuur kom en gaan. Oom Vernon, wat effens in sy pak sweet, maak die voordeur oop, kyk op en af in die straat en trek dan weer sy kop vin-nig terug.

"Hulle is laat!" snou hy vir Harry.

"Ek weet," sê Harry. "Miskien – h'm – is die verkeer erg, of iets."

Tien oor vyf . . . toe kwart oor vyf . . . nou begin Harry ook bekommerd raak. Teen halfses hoor hy hoe oom Vernon en tant Petunia met gedempte stemme in die woonkamer praat.

"Geen bedagsaamheid nie."

"Ons kon 'n afspraak gehad het."

"Dalk dink hulle ons sal hulle vir ete nooi as hulle laat is."

“Wel, dit sal ons beslis nie doen nie,” sê oom Vernon en Harry hoor hoe hy opstaan en op en af in die woonvertrek stap. “Hulle kan die seun vat en hulle uit die voete maak, g’n stuk gerondhangery nie. Dis nou indien hulle hoegenaamd kom. Het seker die verkeerde dag beet. Ek sou sê dat *hulle soort* nie te veel waarde aan stiptelikheid heg nie. Dis óf dit, óf hulle ry in die een of ander ou rammelkas wat iewers gaan staan het – AAAAAAARRRG!”

Harry spring op. Van die ander kant van die woonkamerdeur kom die geluid van die drie Dursleys wat paniekbevange oor die vloer skarrel. Die volgende oomblik vlieg Dudley die portaal beangs binne.

“Wat het gebeur?” sê Harry. “Wat gaan aan?”

Dit lyk of Dudley nie kan praat nie. Met sy hande nog steeds oor sy boude geklem, waggel hy so vinnig as wat hy kan kombuis toe. Harry haas hom na die woonkamer.

’n Harde gestamp en krapgeluide weerklink agter die Dursleys se vuurherd wat met planke toegespyker is. ’n Nagemaakte elektriese koolverwarmer is voor ingeprop.

“Wat is dit?” Tant Petunia snak na asem terwyl sy agteruit tot teen die muur beweeg en verskrik na die verwarmer staar. “Wat is dit, Vernon?”

Hulle hoef nie veel langer te wonder nie. Van binne die toegemaakte vuurherd kan hulle nou stemme hoor.

“Eina! Fred, nee – gaan terug, gaan terug, iets is verkeerd – sê vir George hy moenie – EINA! George, nee, hier’s nie plek nie, gaan gou terug en sê vir Ron –”

“Dalk kan Harry ons hoor, Pa – dalk kan hy ons laat uitkom –”

Daar is ’n harde gehamer van vuiste teen die planke agter die verwarmer.

“Harry? Harry, kan jy ons hoor?”

Die Dursleys draai soos twee briesende dierasies na Harry.

“Wat is dit?” grom oom Vernon. “Wat gaan hier aan?”

“Hulle – hulle het met Floo-poeier hierheen probeer kom,” sê Harry en hy moet spook om nie uit te bars van die lag nie. “Hulle kan met vuur reis – dis net dat julle die vuurherd toegemaak het – wag gou ’n bietjie –”

Hy stap na die vuurherd en roep deur die planke.

“Mnr. Weasley, kan julle my hoor?”

Die gehamer hou op. Iemand van binne die skoorsteen sê, “Sjij!”

“Mnr. Weasley, dis Harry . . . die vuurherd is toegemaak. Julle kan nie hier deurkom nie.”

“Verbrands!” kom mnr. Weasley se stem. “Hoekom op dees aarde het hulle die vuurherd toegebou?”

“Hulle het ’n elektriese verwarmer,” verduidelik Harry.

“Sowaar?” sê mnr. Weasley en hy klink opgewonde. “Eklekties, sê jy? Met ’n *kragprop*? Genade, dit moet ek sien . . . laat ek dink . . . eina, Ron!”

Nou sluit Ron se stem by die ander aan.

“Wat maak ons hier? Het iets verkeerd geloop?”

“O nee, Ron,” kom Fred se stem, baie sarkasties. “Nee, dit is presies waar ons wou wees.”

“Ja, ons het soveel pret,” sê George, en sy stem klink gesmoord asof hy teen die muur vasgedruk is.

“Seuns, seuns,” sê mnr. Weasley floutjies. “Ek probeer dink wat om te doen . . . ja . . . dis die enigste manier . . . staan terug, Harry.”

Harry val terug tot teen die rusbank. Oom Vernon beweeg egter vorentoe.

“Wag ’n bietjie!” bulder hy deur die vuurherd. “Presies wat gaan jy doen –?”

BOEM.

Die elektriese verwarmers skiet oor die vertrek toe die toegespykerde vuurherd oopbars en vir mnr. Weasley, Fred, George en Ron in ’n wolk van rommel en houtsplinters oor die vertrek blaas. Tant Petunia gil en val agteroor oor die koffietafel; oom Vernon vang haar net voor sy die grond tref en gaap die Weasleys dan sprakeloos aan. Hulle het almal helderrooi hare, insluitende Fred en George, wat tot die laaste sproet toe identies is.

“Dis beter,” hyg mnr. Weasley terwyl hy die stof van sy lang groen kleed afborsel en sy bril regstoot. “A – u moet Harry se oom en tante wees!”

Mnr. Weasley, lank en skraal en met ’n effense pankop, stap met ’n uitgestrekte hand op oom Vernon af, maar oom Vernon val etlike treë terug en sleep tant Petunia saam. Oom Vernon is stom. Sy beste pak is vol wit stof wat ook op sy hare en snor gaan lê het, sodat dit lyk asof hy skielik dertig jaar ouer geword het.

“H’m – ja – jammer hieroor,” sê mnr. Weasley. Hy laat sak sy hand en kyk oor sy skouer na die verwoeste vuurherd. “Dis alles my skuld, ek het glad nie daaraan gedink dat ons dalk nie aan die ander kant sal kan uitkom nie. Ek het jul vuurherd aan die Floo-netwerk laat koppel, sien julle – net vir die middag sodat ons vir Harry kan kom haal. Streng genome is Moggelvuurherde nie veronderstel om gekonnekteer te word nie – maar ek het ’n nuttige kontak by die Skoorsteenbeheerraad wat dit vir my reggekry het. Ek kan dit dadelik weer regstel, moet julle nie bekommer nie. Ek maak net gou ’n vuur om die seuns mee terug te stuur, dan maak ek jul vuurherd weer reg, net soos tevore, voor ek disappareer.”

Harry is gereed om te wed dat die Dursleys nie ’n woord hiervan verstaan het nie. Hulle gaap mnr. Weasley nog steeds oorbluf aan. Tant Petunia steier orent en gaan kruip agter oom Vernon weg.

“Hallo, Harry,” sê mnr. Weasley opgetoë. “Is jou trommel gepak?”

“Dis nog bo,” sê Harry en grinnik vir hom.

“Ons sal dit gaan haal,” sê Fred dadelik. Hy knipoog vir Harry en toe

gaan hy en George uit. Hulle weet waar Harry se kamer is, want hulle het hom eenkeer in die middel van die nag kom haal. Harry vermoed dat Fred en George graag 'n glimp van Dudley wil kry; hulle het al baie van hom by Harry gehoor.

“Wel,” sê mnr. Weasley en hy swaai sy arms so effens terwyl hy na woorde soek om die baie onaangename stilte te verbreek. “Baie – h'm – oulike plekkie wat julle hier het.”

Aangesien die woonkamer, wat gewoonlik pynlik netjies is, nou bedek met stof en besaai met stukkies bakstene is, word hierdie opmerking nie juis goed ontvang nie. Oom Vernon se gesig word van voor af pers en tant Petunia kou weer aan haar tong. Tog lyk dit asof hulle te bang is om iets te sê.

Mnr. Weasley kyk om hom rond. Hy is gaande oor enigiets wat met Moggels te doen het. Harry kan sien dat hy brand om die televisie en die videomasjien van naderby te bekyk.

“Hulle werk met ekeltrisiteit, nê?” sê hy asof hy ingelig is. “A ja, ek kan die kragproppe sien. Ek maak kragproppe bymekaar,” verduidelik hy vir oom Vernon. “En batterye. Het 'n baie groot versameling batterye. My vrou dink ek's mal, maar dis tot daarnatoe.”

Dis duidelik dat oom Vernon ook dink dat mnr. Weasley mal is. Hy beweeg ietwat na regs, voor tant Petunia in, asof hy verwag dat mnr. Weasley enige oomblik op hulle gaan afstorm om hulle aan te val.

Net toe kom Dudley die vertrek binne. Harry hoor die geluid van sy trommel op die trappe en besef dadelik dat die geluide Dudley uit die kombuis verskrik het. Dudley skuifel met die muur langs terwyl hy met verskrikte oë na mnr. Weasley staar. Hy probeer om homself agter sy ma en pa weg te steek. Oom Vernon se lyf is groot genoeg om die benerige tant Petunia weg te steek, maar ongelukkig nie naastenby groot genoeg om Dudley ook weg te steek nie.

“A, dis dus jou nefie, Harry?” sê mnr. Weasley, wat nogeens dapper probeer om 'n geselsie aan te knoop.

“Ja,” sê Harry, “dis Dudley.”

Hy en Ron loer na mekaar en kyk dan vinnig weg; die versoeking om uit te bars van die lag is feitlik oorweldigend. Dudley hou nog steeds sy sitvlak vas asof hy bang is dit kan afval. Dit lyk asof mnr. Weasley werklik bekommerd is oor Dudley se eienaardige gedrag. Toe hy weer praat, hoor Harry aan sy stem dat mnr. Weasley reken dat Dudley net so mal is as wat die Dursleys dink hy is, behalwe dat mnr. Weasley eerder simpatiek as bang voel.

“Geniet jy jou vakansie, Dudley?” vra hy vriendelik.

Dudley kreun. Harry sien hoe sy hande sy massiewe sitvlak nog stywer vasklou.

Net toe kom Fred en George die vertrek met Harry se skooltrommel

binne. Hulle kyk om hulle rond tot hulle vir Dudley sien. Hul gesigte breek oop in eenderse, kwaadwillige spotlagte.

“Nou ja,” sê mnr. Weasley. “Ons moet weg wees.”

Hy stoot die moue van sy kleed op en haal sy towerstaf uit. Harry sien hoe die Dursleys soos een man teen die muur terugval.

“*Incendio!*” sê mnr. Weasley en wys met sy towerstaf na die gat in die muur agter hom.

Onmiddellik staan vlamme wat lustig knetter in die vuurherd op, nes of dit al ure lank brand. Mnr. Weasley haal ’n klein koordsakkie uit sy kleed, knoop dit los, neem ’n knippie van die poeier daarin en gooi dit in die vlamme wat smaraggroen word en nog hoër die lug in klim.

“Weg is jy, Fred,” sê mnr. Weasley.

“Ek kom,” sê Fred. “O nee – wag ’n bietjie –”

’n Pakkie lekkers het uit Fred se sak geval en die inhoud rol nou in alle rigtings – groot, vet toffies in helderkleurige papiertjies.

Fred skarrel rond en prop hulle terug in sy sak. Toe wuif hy vrolik vir die Dursleys, tree vorentoe tot binne-in die vlamme en sê, “Die Konyne-nes!” Tant Petunia snak sidderend na haar asem. Daar is ’n whoesj-geluid en Fred verdwyn.

“Goed dan, George,” sê mnr. Weasley, “jy en die trommel.”

Harry help vir George om die trommel tot in die vlamme te dra. Hulle laat dit op een kant staan sodat George dit makliker kan vashou. Toe, met ’n tweede whoesj-geluid en nadat George “Die Konyne-nes!” geroep het, verdwyn hy ook.

“Ron, jy is volgende,” sê mnr. Weasley.

“Sien julle,” sê Ron vrolik vir die Dursleys. Hy grinnik breed vir Harry, stap tot in die vuur, skree, “Die Konyne-nes!” en verdwyn.

Nou is net Harry en mnr. Weasley nog oor.

“Wel . . . tot siens,” sê Harry vir die Dursleys.

Hulle sê nie ’n woord nie. Harry stap na die vuur, maar net toe hy by die vuurherd kom, steek mnr. Weasley sy hand uit om hom terug te hou. Hy kyk verwonderd na die Dursleys.

“Harry het julle gegroet,” sê hy. “Het julle hom nie gehoor nie?”

“Dit maak nie saak nie, mnr. Weasley,” mompel Harry. “Ek gee regtig nie om nie.”

Mnr. Weasley haal egter nie sy hand van Harry se skouer af nie.

“Julle gaan jul nefie eers die volgende somervakansie weer sien,” sê hy ietwat verontwaardig vir oom Vernon. “Julle gaan hom darem seker groet?”

Oom Vernon se gesig vertrek van woede. Dit lyk of die idee van ’n man wat so pas die helfte van sy woonkamer weggeblaas het en nou vir hom bedagsaamheid wil leer hom glad nie aanstaan nie.

Mnr. Weasley se towerstaf is egter nog steeds in sy hand en oom Ver-

nons se klein ogies dartel net een keer soontoe voor hy wrokkig sê, "Tot siens, dan."

"Sien julle," sê Harry en steek een voet uit na die groen vlamme wat nogal soos lekker warm asem voel. Op daardie oomblik hoor hy egter 'n aaklige, gesmoorde geluid agter hom, en tant Petunia gaan aan die skree.

Harry swaai om. Dudley staan nie meer agter sy ouers nie. Hy kniel langs die koffietafel en wurg en stik aan 'n voet lange, slymerige pers ding wat by sy mond uithang. Een verwarde sekonde later besef Harry dat die voet lange ding Dudley se tong is – en dat 'n helderkleurige toffiepapier voor hom op die grond lê.

Tant Petunia slinger haarself op die vloer langs Dudley neer, gryp die punt van sy geswelde tong en probeer dit uit sy mond trek; dis nie 'n wonder dat Dudley erger as tevore wurg en stik en haar probeer wegstamp nie. Oom Vernon bulk en swaai sy arms en mnr. Weasley moet skree om homself hoorbaar te maak.

"Moet julle nie bekommer nie, ek kan dit regmaak!" gil hy terwyl hy met 'n uitgestrekte towerstaf na Dudley toe stap, maar tant Petunia skree erger as tevore en werp haarself op Dudley om hom teen mnr. Weasley te beskerm.

"Nee, werklik!" sê mnr. Weasley moedeloos. "Dit is 'n eenvoudige proses – dit was die toffie – my seun Fred – 'n ware platjie – maar dis bloot 'n Opsweltowerspreuk – ten minste, ek dink dis wat dit is – asseblief, ek kan dit regstel –"

Die Dursleys is egter hoegenaamd nie gerusgestel nie; hulle raak net meer paniekerig; tant Petunia snik histories terwyl sy aan Dudley se tong rem asof sy van plan is om dit uit sy mond te skeur; dit lyk asof Dudley gaan versmoor onder die gekombineerde druk van sy ma en sy tong, en oom Vernon, wat nou heeltemal beheer verloor het, tel 'n porseleinbeeld van die buffet af op en gooi dit hard na mnr. Weasley, wat koes sodat die ornament in die geruïneerde vuurherd flenters val.

"Nee, regtig!" sê mnr. Weasley ergerlik en lig sy towerstaf. "Ek probeer julle help!"

Oom Vernon brul soos 'n gewonde seekoei en tel nog 'n ornament op.

"Harry, loop! Loop!" skree mnr. Weasley terwyl hy sy towerstaf op oom Vernon rig. "Ek sal dinge hier uitsorteer!"

Harry is glad nie lus om die pret mis te loop nie, maar oom Vernon se tweede ornament mis sy linkeroor rakelings en dit laat hom besluit dat dit dalk beter sal wees om die situasie in mnr. Weasley se hande te laat. Hy klim in die vuur, maar kyk oor sy skouer toe hy "Die Konynenes!" sê. Sy laaste vlietende glimp van die woonkamer is van mnr. Weasley wat 'n derde ornament met sy towerstaf uit oom Vernon se hand blaas, tant Petunia wat skreeuend bo-op Dudley lê en Dudley se tong wat soos 'n groot, slymerige luislang kronkel en krul. Die volgende oomblik begin

Harry vinnig in die rondte draai en die Dursleys se woonkamer verdwyn in 'n warreling van smaraggroen vlamme.

CHAPTER FIVE



WEASLEYS' WIZARD WHEEZES

Harry spun faster and faster, elbows tucked tightly to his sides, blurred fireplaces flashing past him, until he started to feel sick and closed his eyes. Then, when at last he felt himself slowing down, he threw out his hands and came to a halt in time to prevent himself from falling face forward out of the Weasleys' kitchen fire.

"Did he eat it?" said Fred excitedly, holding out a hand to pull Harry to his feet.

"Yeah," said Harry, straightening up. "What *was* it?"

"Ton-Tongue Toffee," said Fred brightly. "George and I invented them, and we've been looking for someone to test them on all

summer. . . .”

The tiny kitchen exploded with laughter; Harry looked around and saw that Ron and George were sitting at the scrubbed wooden table with two red-haired people Harry had never seen before, though he knew immediately who they must be: Bill and Charlie, the two eldest Weasley brothers.

“How’re you doing, Harry?” said the nearer of the two, grinning at him and holding out a large hand, which Harry shook, feeling calluses and blisters under his fingers. This had to be Charlie, who worked with dragons in Romania. Charlie was built like the twins, shorter and stockier than Percy and Ron, who were both long and lanky. He had a broad, good-natured face, which was weather-beaten and so freckly that he looked almost tanned; his arms were muscular, and one of them had a large, shiny burn on it.

Bill got to his feet, smiling, and also shook Harry’s hand. Bill came as something of a surprise. Harry knew that he worked for the Wizarding bank, Gringotts, and that Bill had been Head Boy at Hogwarts; Harry had always imagined Bill to be an older version of Percy: fussy about rule-breaking and fond of bossing everyone around. However, Bill was — there was no other word for it — *cool*. He was tall, with long hair that he had tied back in a ponytail. He was wearing an earring with what looked like a fang dangling from it. Bill’s clothes would not have looked out of place at a rock concert, except that Harry recognized his boots to be made, not of leather, but of dragon hide.

Before any of them could say anything else, there was a faint popping noise, and Mr. Weasley appeared out of thin air at George’s

shoulder. He was looking angrier than Harry had ever seen him.

“That *wasn't funny*, Fred!” he shouted. “What on earth did you give that Muggle boy?”

“I didn't give him anything,” said Fred, with another evil grin. “I just *dropped* it. . . . It was his fault he went and ate it, I never told him to.”

“You dropped it on purpose!” roared Mr. Weasley. “You knew he'd eat it, you knew he was on a diet —”

“How big did his tongue get?” George asked eagerly.

“It was four feet long before his parents would let me shrink it!”

Harry and the Weasleys roared with laughter again.

“It *isn't funny*!” Mr. Weasley shouted. “That sort of behavior seriously undermines wizard–Muggle relations! I spend half my life campaigning against the mistreatment of Muggles, and my own sons —”

“We didn't give it to him because he's a Muggle!” said Fred indignantly.

“No, we gave it to him because he's a great bullying git,” said George. “Isn't he, Harry?”

“Yeah, he is, Mr. Weasley,” said Harry earnestly.

“That's not the point!” raged Mr. Weasley. “You wait until I tell your mother —”

“Tell me what?” said a voice behind them.

Mrs. Weasley had just entered the kitchen. She was a short, plump woman with a very kind face, though her eyes were presently narrowed with suspicion.

“Oh hello, Harry, dear,” she said, spotting him and smiling. Then her eyes snapped back to her husband. “Tell me *what*, Arthur?”

Mr. Weasley hesitated. Harry could tell that, however angry he was with Fred and George, he hadn’t really intended to tell Mrs. Weasley what had happened. There was a silence, while Mr. Weasley eyed his wife nervously. Then two girls appeared in the kitchen doorway behind Mrs. Weasley. One, with very bushy brown hair and rather large front teeth, was Harry’s and Ron’s friend, Hermione Granger. The other, who was small and red-haired, was Ron’s younger sister, Ginny. Both of them smiled at Harry, who grinned back, which made Ginny go scarlet — she had been very taken with Harry ever since his first visit to the Burrow.

“Tell me *what*, Arthur?” Mrs. Weasley repeated, in a dangerous sort of voice.

“It’s nothing, Molly,” mumbled Mr. Weasley, “Fred and George just — but I’ve had words with them —”

“What have they done this time?” said Mrs. Weasley. “If it’s got anything to do with Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes —”

“Why don’t you show Harry where he’s sleeping, Ron?” said Hermione from the doorway.

“He knows where he’s sleeping,” said Ron, “in my room, he slept there last —”

“We can all go,” said Hermione pointedly.

“Oh,” said Ron, cottoning on. “Right.”

“Yeah, we’ll come too,” said George.

“*You stay where you are!*” snarled Mrs. Weasley.

Harry and Ron edged out of the kitchen, and they, Hermione, and

Ginny set off along the narrow hallway and up the rickety staircase that zigzagged through the house to the upper stories.

“What are Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes?” Harry asked as they climbed.

Ron and Ginny both laughed, although Hermione didn’t.

“Mum found this stack of order forms when she was cleaning Fred and George’s room,” said Ron quietly. “Great long price lists for stuff they’ve invented. Joke stuff, you know. Fake wands and trick sweets, loads of stuff. It was brilliant, I never knew they’d been inventing all that . . .”

“We’ve been hearing explosions out of their room for ages, but we never thought they were actually *making* things,” said Ginny. “We thought they just liked the noise.”

“Only, most of the stuff — well, all of it, really — was a bit dangerous,” said Ron, “and, you know, they were planning to sell it at Hogwarts to make some money, and Mum went mad at them. Told them they weren’t allowed to make any more of it, and burned all the order forms. . . . She’s furious at them anyway. They didn’t get as many O.W.L.s as she expected.”

O.W.L.s were Ordinary Wizarding Levels, the examinations Hogwarts students took at the age of fifteen.

“And then there was this big row,” Ginny said, “because Mum wants them to go into the Ministry of Magic like Dad, and they told her all they want to do is open a joke shop.”

Just then a door on the second landing opened, and a face poked out wearing horn-rimmed glasses and a very annoyed expression.

“Hi, Percy,” said Harry.

“Oh hello, Harry,” said Percy. “I was wondering who was making all the noise. I’m trying to work in here, you know — I’ve got a report to finish for the office — and it’s rather difficult to concentrate when people keep thundering up and down the stairs.”

“We’re not *thundering*,” said Ron irritably. “We’re walking. Sorry if we’ve disturbed the top-secret workings of the Ministry of Magic.”

“What are you working on?” said Harry.

“A report for the Department of International Magical Cooperation,” said Percy smugly. “We’re trying to standardize cauldron thickness. Some of these foreign imports are just a shade too thin — leakages have been increasing at a rate of almost three percent a year —”

“That’ll change the world, that report will,” said Ron. “Front page of the *Daily Prophet*, I expect, cauldron leaks.”

Percy went slightly pink.

“You might sneer, Ron,” he said heatedly, “but unless some sort of international law is imposed we might well find the market flooded with flimsy, shallow-bottomed products that seriously endanger —”

“Yeah, yeah, all right,” said Ron, and he started off upstairs again. Percy slammed his bedroom door shut. As Harry, Hermione, and Ginny followed Ron up three more flights of stairs, shouts from the kitchen below echoed up to them. It sounded as though Mr. Weasley had told Mrs. Weasley about the toffees.

The room at the top of the house where Ron slept looked much as it had the last time that Harry had come to stay: the same posters of Ron’s favorite Quidditch team, the Chudley Cannons, were whirling and waving on the walls and sloping ceiling, and the fish tank on the

windowsill, which had previously held frog spawn, now contained one extremely large frog. Ron's old rat, Scabbers, was here no more, but instead there was the tiny gray owl that had delivered Ron's letter to Harry in Privet Drive. It was hopping up and down in a small cage and twittering madly.

"Shut *up*, Pig," said Ron, edging his way between two of the four beds that had been squeezed into the room. "Fred and George are in here with us, because Bill and Charlie are in their room," he told Harry. "Percy gets to keep his room all to himself because he's got to *work*."

"Er — why are you calling that owl Pig?" Harry asked Ron.

"Because he's being stupid," said Ginny. "Its proper name is Pigwidgeon."

"Yeah, and that's not a stupid name at all," said Ron sarcastically. "Ginny named him," he explained to Harry. "She reckons it's sweet. And I tried to change it, but it was too late, he won't answer to anything else. So now he's Pig. I've got to keep him up here because he annoys Errol and Hermes. He annoys me too, come to that."

Pigwidgeon zoomed happily around his cage, hooting shrilly. Harry knew Ron too well to take him seriously. He had moaned continually about his old rat, Scabbers, but had been most upset when Hermione's cat, Crookshanks, appeared to have eaten him.

"Where's Crookshanks?" Harry asked Hermione now.

"Out in the garden, I expect," she said. "He likes chasing gnomes. He's never seen any before."

"Percy's enjoying work, then?" said Harry, sitting down on one of the beds and watching the Chudley Cannons zooming in and out of the

posters on the ceiling.

“Enjoying it?” said Ron darkly. “I don’t reckon he’d come home if Dad didn’t make him. He’s obsessed. Just don’t get him onto the subject of his boss. *According to Mr. Crouch . . . as I was saying to Mr. Crouch . . . Mr. Crouch is of the opinion . . . Mr. Crouch was telling me . . .* They’ll be announcing their engagement any day now.”

“Have you had a good summer, Harry?” said Hermione. “Did you get our food parcels and everything?”

“Yeah, thanks a lot,” said Harry. “They saved my life, those cakes.”

“And have you heard from — ?” Ron began, but at a look from Hermione he fell silent. Harry knew Ron had been about to ask about Sirius. Ron and Hermione had been so deeply involved in helping Sirius escape from the Ministry of Magic that they were almost as concerned about Harry’s godfather as he was. However, discussing him in front of Ginny was a bad idea. Nobody but themselves and Professor Dumbledore knew about how Sirius had escaped, or believed in his innocence.

“I think they’ve stopped arguing,” said Hermione, to cover the awkward moment, because Ginny was looking curiously from Ron to Harry. “Shall we go down and help your mum with dinner?”

“Yeah, all right,” said Ron. The four of them left Ron’s room and went back downstairs to find Mrs. Weasley alone in the kitchen, looking extremely bad-tempered.

“We’re eating out in the garden,” she said when they came in. “There’s just not room for eleven people in here. Could you take the plates outside, girls? Bill and Charlie are setting up the tables.

Knives and forks, please, you two,” she said to Ron and Harry, pointing her wand a little more vigorously than she had intended at a pile of potatoes in the sink, which shot out of their skins so fast that they ricocheted off the walls and ceiling.

“Oh for heaven’s *sake*,” she snapped, now directing her wand at a dustpan, which hopped off the sideboard and started skating across the floor, scooping up the potatoes. “Those two!” she burst out savagely, now pulling pots and pans out of a cupboard, and Harry knew she meant Fred and George. “I don’t know what’s going to happen to them, I really don’t. No ambition, unless you count making as much trouble as they possibly can. . . .”

Mrs. Weasley slammed a large copper saucepan down on the kitchen table and began to wave her wand around inside it. A creamy sauce poured from the wand-tip as she stirred.

“It’s not as though they haven’t got brains,” she continued irritably, taking the saucepan over to the stove and lighting it with a further poke of her wand, “but they’re wasting them, and unless they pull themselves together soon, they’ll be in real trouble. I’ve had more owls from Hogwarts about them than the rest put together. If they carry on the way they’re going, they’ll end up in front of the Improper Use of Magic Office.”

Mrs. Weasley jabbed her wand at the cutlery drawer, which shot open. Harry and Ron both jumped out of the way as several knives soared out of it, flew across the kitchen, and began chopping the potatoes, which had just been tipped back into the sink by the dustpan.

“I don’t know where we went wrong with them,” said Mrs.

Weasley, putting down her wand and starting to pull out still more saucepans. “It’s been the same for years, one thing after another, and they won’t listen to — OH NOT *AGAIN!*”

She had picked up her wand from the table, and it had emitted a loud squeak and turned into a giant rubber mouse.

“One of their fake wands again!” she shouted. “How many times have I told them not to leave them lying around?”

She grabbed her real wand and turned around to find that the sauce on the stove was smoking.

“C’mon,” Ron said hurriedly to Harry, seizing a handful of cutlery from the open drawer, “let’s go and help Bill and Charlie.”

They left Mrs. Weasley and headed out the back door into the yard.

They had only gone a few paces when Hermione’s bandy-legged ginger cat, Crookshanks, came pelting out of the garden, bottlebrush tail held high in the air, chasing what looked like a muddy potato on legs. Harry recognized it instantly as a gnome. Barely ten inches high, its horny little feet pattered very fast as it sprinted across the yard and dived headlong into one of the Wellington boots that lay scattered around the door. Harry could hear the gnome giggling madly as Crookshanks inserted a paw into the boot, trying to reach it. Meanwhile, a very loud crashing noise was coming from the other side of the house. The source of the commotion was revealed as they entered the garden, and saw that Bill and Charlie both had their wands out, and were making two battered old tables fly high above the lawn, smashing into each other, each attempting to knock the other’s out of the air. Fred and George were cheering, Ginny was laughing, and Hermione was hovering near the hedge, apparently torn

between amusement and anxiety.

Bill's table caught Charlie's with a huge bang and knocked one of its legs off. There was a clatter from overhead, and they all looked up to see Percy's head poking out of a window on the second floor.

"Will you keep it down?!" he bellowed.

"Sorry, Perce," said Bill, grinning. "How're the cauldron bottoms coming on?"

"Very badly," said Percy peevishly, and he slammed the window shut. Chuckling, Bill and Charlie directed the tables safely onto the grass, end to end, and then, with a flick of his wand, Bill reattached the table leg and conjured tablecloths from nowhere.

By seven o'clock, the two tables were groaning under dishes and dishes of Mrs. Weasley's excellent cooking, and the nine Weasleys, Harry, and Hermione were settling themselves down to eat beneath a clear, deep-blue sky. To somebody who had been living on meals of increasingly stale cake all summer, this was paradise, and at first, Harry listened rather than talked as he helped himself to chicken and ham pie, boiled potatoes, and salad.

At the far end of the table, Percy was telling his father all about his report on cauldron bottoms.

"I've told Mr. Crouch that I'll have it ready by Tuesday," Percy was saying pompously. "That's a bit sooner than he expected it, but I like to keep on top of things. I think he'll be grateful I've done it in good time, I mean, it's extremely busy in our department just now, what with all the arrangements for the World Cup. We're just not getting the support we need from the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Ludo Bagman —"

“I like Ludo,” said Mr. Weasley mildly. “He was the one who got us such good tickets for the Cup. I did him a bit of a favor: His brother, Otto, got into a spot of trouble — a lawnmower with unnatural powers — I smoothed the whole thing over.”

“Oh Bagman’s *likable* enough, of course,” said Percy dismissively, “but how he ever got to be Head of Department . . . when I compare him to Mr. Crouch! I can’t see Mr. Crouch losing a member of our department and not trying to find out what’s happened to them. You realize Bertha Jorkins has been missing for over a month now? Went on holiday to Albania and never came back?”

“Yes, I was asking Ludo about that,” said Mr. Weasley, frowning. “He says Bertha’s gotten lost plenty of times before now — though I must say, if it was someone in my department, I’d be worried. . . .”

“Oh Bertha’s *hopeless*, all right,” said Percy. “I hear she’s been shunted from department to department for years, much more trouble than she’s worth . . . but all the same, Bagman ought to be trying to find her. Mr. Crouch has been taking a personal interest, she worked in our department at one time, you know, and I think Mr. Crouch was quite fond of her — but Bagman just keeps laughing and saying she probably misread the map and ended up in Australia instead of Albania. However” — Percy heaved an impressive sigh and took a deep swig of elderflower wine — “we’ve got quite enough on our plates at the Department of International Magical Cooperation without trying to find members of other departments too. As you know, we’ve got another big event to organize right after the World Cup.”

Percy cleared his throat significantly and looked down toward the

end of the table where Harry, Ron, and Hermione were sitting. “*You* know the one I’m talking about, Father.” He raised his voice slightly. “The top-secret one.”

Ron rolled his eyes and muttered to Harry and Hermione, “He’s been trying to get us to ask what that event is ever since he started work. Probably an exhibition of thick-bottomed cauldrons.”

In the middle of the table, Mrs. Weasley was arguing with Bill about his earring, which seemed to be a recent acquisition.

“... with a horrible great fang on it. Really, Bill, what do they say at the bank?”

“Mum, no one at the bank gives a damn how I dress as long as I bring home plenty of treasure,” said Bill patiently.

“And your hair’s getting silly, dear,” said Mrs. Weasley, fingering her wand lovingly. “I wish you’d let me give it a trim. . . .”

“I like it,” said Ginny, who was sitting beside Bill. “You’re so old-fashioned, Mum. Anyway, it’s nowhere near as long as Professor Dumbledore’s. . . .”

Next to Mrs. Weasley, Fred, George, and Charlie were all talking spiritedly about the World Cup.

“It’s got to be Ireland,” said Charlie thickly, through a mouthful of potato. “They flattened Peru in the semifinals.”

“Bulgaria has got Viktor Krum, though,” said Fred.

“Krum’s one decent player, Ireland has got seven,” said Charlie shortly. “I wish England had got through. That was embarrassing, that was.”

“What happened?” said Harry eagerly, regretting more than ever his isolation from the Wizarding world when he was stuck on Privet

Drive.

“Went down to Transylvania, three hundred and ninety to ten,” said Charlie gloomily. “Shocking performance. And Wales lost to Uganda, and Scotland was slaughtered by Luxembourg.”

Harry had been on the Gryffindor House Quidditch team ever since his first year at Hogwarts and owned one of the best racing brooms in the world, a Firebolt. Flying came more naturally to Harry than anything else in the magical world, and he played in the position of Seeker on the Gryffindor House team.

Mr. Weasley conjured up candles to light the darkening garden before they had their homemade strawberry ice cream, and by the time they had finished, moths were fluttering low over the table, and the warm air was perfumed with the smells of grass and honeysuckle. Harry was feeling extremely well fed and at peace with the world as he watched several gnomes sprinting through the rosebushes, laughing madly and closely pursued by Crookshanks.

Ron looked carefully up the table to check that the rest of the family were all busy talking, then he said very quietly to Harry, “So — *have* you heard from Sirius lately?”

Hermione looked around, listening closely.

“Yeah,” said Harry softly, “twice. He sounds okay. I wrote to him yesterday. He might write back while I’m here.”

He suddenly remembered the reason he had written to Sirius, and for a moment was on the verge of telling Ron and Hermione about his scar hurting again, and about the dream that had awoken him . . . but he really didn’t want to worry them just now, not when he himself was feeling so happy and peaceful.

“Look at the time,” Mrs. Weasley said suddenly, checking her wristwatch. “You really should be in bed, the whole lot of you — you’ll be up at the crack of dawn to get to the Cup. Harry, if you leave your school list out, I’ll get your things for you tomorrow in Diagon Alley. I’m getting everyone else’s. There might not be time after the World Cup, the match went on for five days last time.”

“Wow — hope it does this time!” said Harry enthusiastically.

“Well, I certainly don’t,” said Percy sanctimoniously. “I *shudder* to think what the state of my in-tray would be if I was away from work for five days.”

“Yeah, someone might slip dragon dung in it again, eh, Perce?” said Fred.

“That was a sample of fertilizer from Norway!” said Percy, going very red in the face. “It was nothing *personal*!”

“It was,” Fred whispered to Harry as they got up from the table. “We sent it.”

Weasleys se Wonderpoetse

Harry draai al vinniger en vinniger in die rondte, sy elmboë styf teen sy sye vasgedruk, vuurherde flits verby hom in 'n dowwe streep tot hy begin naar voel en sy oë toemaak. Toe hy uiteindelik voel dat hy spoed verloor, steek hy sy hande uit en kom net betyds tot stilstand, voor hy gesig eerste by die Weasleys se kombuisvuur uitval.

“Het hy dit geëet?” vra Fred opgewonde terwyl hy 'n hand uitsteek om Harry op te help.

“Ja,” sê Harry terwyl hy regop kom. “Wat was dit?”

“Tontongtoffie,” sê Fred in sy skik. “Ek en George het dit uitgevind, ons sukkel al die hele vakansie om iemand te kry om dit op uit te toets . . .”

Die klein kombuisie ontplof amper soos hulle lag. Harry kyk rond en sien vir Ron en George by die geskropte houttafel sit saam met twee rooikopmense wat hy nog nooit tevore gesien het nie, hoewel hy dadelik weet wie hulle is: Bill en Charlie, die twee oudste Wesley-broers.

“Hoe gaan dit, Harry?” sê die een naaste aan hom en hou 'n groot hand grinnikend na hom toe uit. Toe Harry dit skud, voel hy eelte en blase onder sy vingers. Dit moet Charlie wees, wat met drake in Roemenië werk. Charlie is net soos die tweeling gebou, korter en frisser as Percy en Ron, wat albei lank en lenig is. Hy het 'n breë, goedige gesig, verweerd en so vol sproete dat hy amper bruingebrand lyk; sy arms is gespierd en op een van hulle is 'n lang, blink brandmerk.

Bill staan glimlaggend op en skud ook Harry se hand. Bill is ietwat van 'n verrassing. Harry het geweet dat hy vir die towenaarsbank, Edelgolt, werk en dat hy hoofseun by Hogwarts was en het verwag dat Bill 'n ouer weergawe van Percy gaan wees; iemand wat gesteld is op reëls en wat daarvan hou om oor almal baas te speel. Bill is egter – en daar is geen ander woord daarvoor nie – *cool*. Hy is lank, met lang hare wat hy in 'n poniestert vasmaak. Hy dra 'n oorring waaraan iets wat soos 'n slagtang lyk, hang. Sy klere sal heeltemal goed by 'n rock-konsert pas, behalwe dat Harry kan sien dat sy stewels nie van leer gemaak is nie, maar van draakvel.

Voor enigeen van hulle nog iets kan sê, hoor hulle 'n dowwe plofgeluid en mnr. Weasley verskyn asof van nêrens by George se skouer. Hy lyk kwater as wat Harry hom nog ooit gesien het.

"Dit was *nie snaaks nie*, Fred!" skreeu hy. "Wat op aarde het jy vir daar-die Moggelseun ingegee?"

"Ek het niks vir hom ingegee nie," sê Fred met 'n spotlag. "Ek het dit net *laat val* . . . dis sy eie skuld as hy dit staan en eet het, ek het nie vir hom *gesê* hy moet dit doen nie."

"Jy het dit *aspris* laat val!" brul mnr. Weasley. "Jy het geweet hy sal dit eet, jy het geweet hy is op 'n dieet –"

"Hoe groot het sy tong geword?" vra George gretig.

"Dit was 'n meter lank voor sy ouers my toegelaat het om dit te laat krimp!"

Nou skater Harry en die Weasleys opnuut van die lag.

"Dit is *nie snaaks nie!*" skreeu mnr. Weasley. "Dis hierdie soort gedrag wat Moggel-towenaarbetrekkinge ondermyn! Ek swoeg vir die helfte van my lewe teen die mishandeling van Moggels en my eie seuns –"

"Ons het dit nie vir hom gegee omdat hy 'n Moggel is nie!" sê Fred verontwaardig.

"Nee, ons het dit vir hom gegee omdat hy 'n yslike bielie van 'n boelie is," sê George. "Nie waar nie, Harry?"

"Ja, hy is, mnr. Weasley," sê Harry ernstig.

"Dis nie die punt nie!" raas mnr. Weasley. "Wag net tot ek vir jul ma sê –"

"Wat vir my sê?" sê 'n stem agter hulle.

Mev. Weasley het die kombuis so pas binnegekom. Sy is 'n kort, mollige vrou met 'n baie vriendelike gesig, hoewel haar oë op die oomblik op agterdochtige skrefies getrek is.

"O hallo, Harry, my skat," sê sy met 'n glimlag toe sy hom sien. Dan spring haar oë weer terug na haar man. "Wat vir my sê, Arthur?"

Mnr. Weasley aarsel. Harry kan sien dat, hoe kwaad hy ook al vir Fred en George mag wees, hy nie regtig van plan was om vir mev. Weasley te sê wat gebeur het nie. Daar is 'n stilte waarin mnr. Weasley sy vrou senu-agtig dophou. Toe verskyn twee meisies in die kombuisdeur agter mev. Weasley. Die een, wat ruie bruin hare het, is Harry en Ron se vriendin, Hermien la Grange. Die ander een, klein en met rooi hare, is Ron se sus-sie, Ginny. Albei van hulle glimlag vir Harry, wat teruglag sodat Ginny skarlakenrooi word – sy is baie erg oor Harry, van die eerste keer af dat hy by Die Konynenes kom kuier het.

"Wat vir my sê, Arthur?" herhaal mev. Weasley in 'n gevaarlike stemtoon.

"Niks nie, Molly," mompel mnr. Weasley. "Fred en George het net – maar ek het reeds met hulle daaroor gepraat –"

“Wat het hulle dié keer gedoen?” vra mev. Weasley. “As dit enigiets met *Weasleys se Wonderpoetse* te doen het –”

“Hoekom gaan wys jy nie vir Harry waar hy slaap nie, Ron?” sê Hermien van die deur af.

“Hy weet waar hy slaap,” sê Ron. “In my kamer, hy’t laas ook –”

“Ons kan almal gaan kyk,” sê Hermien met nadruk.

“O,” sê Ron wat skielik snap wat sy bedoel. “Goed.”

“Ja, ons kom ook saam,” sê George.

“Jy bly net waar jy is!” snou mev. Weasley hom toe.

Harry en Ron skuifel uit die kombuis en toe stap hulle, Hermien en Ginny deur die smal portaal en op met die lendelam trappe wat kruis en dwars deur die huis na die boonste verdiepings lei.

“Wat is *Weasleys se Wonderpoetse*?” vra Harry terwyl hulle klim.

Ron en Ginny lag albei, maar nie Hermien nie.

“Ma het hierdie stapel bestelvorms ontdek toe sy Fred en George se kamer skoongemaak het,” sê Ron stilweg. “Hengse lang pryslyste vir goed wat hulle uitgevind het. Grapgoed, jy weet. Kultowerstawwe en foplekkers, tonne goed. Dit is briljant, ek het nie geweet dat hulle al dié goed uitgevind het nie . . .”

“Ons hoor al vir wie weet hoe lank allerhande ontploffings in hul kamer, maar ons het nie gedink dat hulle regtig goeters *maak* nie,” sê Ginny. “Ons dag hulle hou maar net van die geraas.”

“Dis net dat die meeste van die goed – wel, eintlik omtrent alles – nogal gevaarlik is,” sê Ron, “en weet jy wat, hulle was van plan om dit by Hogwarts te verkoop om geld te maak. Ma het hulle amper vermoor. Vir hulle gesê hulle mag niks meer maak nie, en sy’t al die bestelvorms verbrand . . . sy’s in elk geval woedend vir hulle. Hulle het nie naastenby soveel UILE gekry as wat sy verwag het nie.”

UILE is Uitsonderlike Intellektuele Liga, die eksamen wat Hogwarts-studente moet aflê wanneer hulle vyftien is.

“Toe was daar hierdie hengse argument,” sê Ginny, “omdat Ma wil hê dat hulle soos Pa by die Ministerie vir Towerkuns moet gaan werk, terwyl hulle sê al wat hulle wil doen, is om ’n grapwinkel oop te maak.”

Net toe gaan ’n deur op die tweede trapportaal oop en ’n gesig met ’n horingraambрил en ’n ergerlike uitdrukking loer uit.

“Hallo, Percy,” sê Harry.

“O hallo, Harry,” sê Percy. “Ek het gewonder wie so raas. Ek probeer hier binne werk, weet julle – ek moet ’n verslag klaarmaak vir die kantoor – en dit is nogal moeilik om te konsentreer as mense aanhoudend op en af met die trappe hardloop.”

“Ons het nie *gehardloop* nie,” sê Ron geïrriteerd. “Ons het gestap. Jammer as ons die hoogs geheime werk van die Ministerie vir Towerkuns versteur het.”

“Waaraan werk jy?” vra Harry.

“’n Verslag vir die Departement van Internasionale Magiese Samewerking,” sê Percy selfvoldaan. “Ons probeer om die dikte van hekseketels te standaardiseer. Sommige van hierdie ingevoerde produkte is ’n aks te dun – lekkasies het toegeneem teen ’n tempo van amper drie persent per jaar –”

“Dit sal die wêreld verander, daardie verslag,” sê Ron. “Voorblad van die *Daaglikse Profeet*, sou ek sê, hekseketellekkasiegaatjies.”

Percy word effens pienk.

“Spot maar, Ron,” sê hy vererg, “maar as die een of ander internasionale wet nie toegepas word nie, kan ons vind dat die mark oorstrom word deur produkte met dun bodems, wat ernstige gevolge kan inhou vir –”

“Ja, ja, oukei,” sê Ron en begin weer aanstap boontoe. Percy klap sy kamerdeur toe. Terwyl Harry, Hermien en Ginny agter Ron aan met nog drie stelle trappe opstap, weergalm krete uit die kombuis van onder hulle. Dit klink asof mnr. Weasley vir mev. Weasley van die toffies vertel het.

Die kamer waar Ron heel bo in die huis slaap, lyk baie soos die vorige keer toe Harry daar was; dieselfde plakkate van Ron se gunsteling-Kwid-diekspan, die Chudley Cannons, warrel en waai teen die mure en die skuins plafon, en in die vistenk op die vensterbank waarin daar die vorige keer paddaeiers was, is nou een besonder groot padda. Ron se ou rot, Skille, is nie meer daar nie; in sy plek is die klein grys uiltjie wat Ron se brief by Harry in Ligusterlaan afgelewer het. Hy hop op en af in ’n klein kou en kwetter uitgelate.

“Bly stil, Pig,” sê Ron terwyl hy tussen twee van die vier beddens wat in die kamer ingedruk is, skuifel. “Fred en George slaap hier by ons omdat Bill en Charlie in hul kamer is,” sê hy vir Harry. “Percy behou sy kamer omdat hy kamma werk.”

“H’m – hoekom noem jy die uil Pig?” vra Harry vir Ron.

“Omdat hy simpel is,” sê Ginny. “Sy regte naam is Pigwidgeon.”

“Ja, en dit is glad nie ’n simpel naam nie,” sê Ron sarkasties. “Ginny het hom gedoop,” verduidelik hy vir Harry. “Sy dink dis oulik. Ek het dit probeer verander, maar dit was te laat, hy reageer op g’n ander naam nie. Nou is hy Pig. Ek moet hom hier bo hou, want hy irriteer vir Errol en Hermes. Ek moet sê, hy irriteer my nogal ook.”

Pigwidgeon vlieg vrolik op en neer in sy kou terwyl hy skril hoe-hoe. Harry ken Ron te goed om hom ernstig op te neem. Hy het gedurig oor sy ou rot, Skille, gekla, maar was baie ontsteld toe dit gelyk het asof Hermien se kat, Kromskeen, hom opgevreet het.

“Waar is Kromskeen?” vra Harry nou vir Hermien.

“Buite in die tuin, dink ek,” sê sy. “Hy hou daarvan om die kabouters te jaag. Hy het nog nooit tevore sulke goed gesien nie.”

“Percy geniet dus sy werk?” vra Harry terwyl hy op die bed gaan sit om te kyk hoe die Chudley Cannons by die plakgate teen die plafon in- en uitjaag.

“Geniet?” sê Ron somber. “Ek dink nie hy sal huis toe kom as Pa hom nie dwing nie. Hy is soos ’n besetene. Moet tog net nie dat hy oor sy baas praat nie. Volgens *mnr. Crouch . . . soos ek vir mnr. Crouch gesê het . . . mnr. Crouch reken . . . mnr. Crouch het vir my gesê . . .* Hulle sal vir seker een van die dae hul verlowing aankondig.”

“Het jy ’n lekker vakansie gehad, Harry?” vra Hermien. “Het jy jou kospakkies en alles gekry?”

“Ja, baie dankie,” sê Harry. “Hulle’t my lewe gered, daardie koekies.”

“En wat hoor jy van –?” begin Ron, maar na ’n kyk van Hermien bly hy stil. Harry weet dat Ron op die punt was om hom oor Sirius uit te vra. Ron en Hermien was diep betrokke toe Sirius van die Ministerie vir Toewerkuns ontsnap het en is amper net so besorg oor Harry se peetpa as hy. Om hom voor Ginny te bespreek, is egter nie ’n goeie idee nie. Niemand behalwe hulle en professor Dompeldorius weet hoe Sirius ontsnap het, of glo in sy onskuld nie.

“Ek dink hulle het ophou stry,” sê Hermien om die ongemaklike oomblik te oorbrug, want Ginny kyk nuuskierig van Ron na Harry. “Sal ons afgaan en jou ma met die aandete gaan help?”

“Oukei, ja,” sê Ron. Die vierstuks stap by Ron se kamer uit en af ondertoe na waar mev. Weasley, wat bitter omgekrap lyk, alleen in die kombuis is.

“Ons eet buite in die tuin,” sê sy toe hulle inkom. “Daar’s nie genoeg plek vir elf mense hier binne nie. Sal julle die borde buitentoe neem, meisies? Bill en Charlie is besig om die tafels op te slaan. Messe en vurke, julle twee, asseblief,” sê sy vir Ron en Harry en rig haar towerstaf met ’n bietjie meer energie as wat sy bedoel het op die hoop aartappels in die wasbak. Hulle skiet so vinnig uit hul skille dat hulle van die mure en plafonne af bons.

“Ag, om hemelsnaam,” sê sy ergerlik. Nou mik sy haar towerstaf na die skoppie wat van sy haak afspring en oor die vloer gly om die aartappels op te skep. “Daardie twee!” vaar sy verwoed uit terwyl sy potte en panne uit ’n kas haal. Harry weet dat sy van Fred en George praat. “Ek weet nie wat van hulle gaan word nie, ek weet regtig nie. Geen ambisie nie, tensy jy soveel moles moontlik tel . . .”

Sy plak ’n groot koperpan op die kombuistafel neer en waai met haar towerstaf daarin rond. Soos sy roer, drup ’n romerige sous uit die towerstaf se punt.

“Dis nie asof hulle geen verstand het nie,” gaan sy wrewelig voort terwyl sy die pan na die stoof neem, wat sy met ’n verdere swaai van haar towerstaf aansteek, “maar hulle mors dit, en as hulle hulself nie binne-

kort regruk nie, sal hulle nog in groot moeilikheid beland. Ek het al meer uile oor hulle van Hogwarts af gehad as vir die res van julle tesame. As hulle so voortgaan, word hulle nog voor die Kantoor vir die Ongemagtigde Gebruik van Towerkuns gedaag.”

Mev. Weasley mik haar towerstaf na die messegoedlaai wat oopskiet. Harry en Ron wip uit die pad toe etlike messe uitspring, oor die kombuis vlieg en begin om die aartappels wat die skoppie so pas in die wasbak teruggegooi het, op te sny.

“Ek weet nie waar ons met hulle verkeerd gegaan het nie,” sê mev. Weasley. Sy sit haar towerstaf neer en haal nog meer panne uit. “Dis net dieselfde, jaar na jaar, die een ding na die ander, en hulle wil nie luister na – O, NEE, NIE WEER NIE!”

Sy het haar towerstaf so pas van die tafel af opgetel toe dit met ’n harde piepgeluid in ’n enorme rubbermuis verander.

“Nog een van hul kultowerstawwe!” skree sy. “Hoeveel keer moet ek vir daardie twee sê om die goed nie te laat rondlê nie?”

Sy gryp haar regte towerstaf, maar toe sy omdraai, is die sous op die stoof aan die rook.

“Komaan,” sê Ron vinnig vir Harry terwyl hy ’n hand vol messegoed uit die laai haal, “kom ons gaan help vir Bill en Charlie.”

Hulle los mev. Weasley net daar en mik vir die agterdeur wat na die tuin lei.

Hulle het net ’n paar tree gegee toe Kromskeen, Hermien se bakbeen-gemmerkat, met sy borselstert hoog in die lug uit die tuin gehardloop kom agter iets aan wat soos ’n modderige aartappel op bene lyk. Harry herken dit dadelik as ’n kabouter. Hy is skaars dertig sentimeter hoog en sy vereelte voetjies klap op die grond soos hy oor die werf skarrel en hals-oorkop in een van die waterstewels wat by die deur lê, spring. Harry hoor hoe die kabouter uitgelate giggel terwyl Kromskeen ’n poot bo by die stewel indruk in ’n poging om hom by te kom. Intussen is daar ’n baie harde slag van die ander kant van die huis af. Toe hulle die tuin instap, sien hulle die bron van die kabaal. Bill en Charlie se towerstawwe is uit en hulle laat twee gehawende ou tafels hoog bo die grasperk teen mekaar bots. Elkeen probeer om die ander een s’n uit die lug te stamp. Fred en George juig hulle toe, Ginny lag en Hermien staan aarselend langs die heining; sy is nie seker of sy angstig of geamuseerd moet wees nie.

Dan tref Bill se tafel Charlie s’n met ’n harde slag en een van die pote breek af. Daar is ’n gekletter van bo af en toe hulle opkyk, sien hulle Percy se kop wat by ’n venster op die tweede verdieping uitsteék.

“Moet julle so raas?” bulder hy.

“Jammer, Perce,” sê Bill grinnikend. “Hoe gaan dit met die heksekettel-bodems?”

“Baie sleg,” sê Percy nukkerig en klap die venster toe. Bill en Charlie

giggel en stuur die tafels terug grond toe sodat hulle kop aan kop staan. Toe, met 'n swaai van sy towerstaf, heg Bill die poot weer aan en tower tafeldoeke van nêrens af op.

Teen sewe-uur kreun die tafels onder etlike van mev. Weasley se uitmuntende disse en die nege Weasleys, Harry en Hermien sit aan om onder 'n helder, diepblou hemel te eet. Vir iemand wie se maaltye die hele somervakansie uit koek bestaan het wat al ouer word, is dit hemels, en aanvanklik luister Harry sonder 'n woord terwyl hy homself aan hoender-en-ham-pastei, gekookte aartappels en slaai help.

Aan die onderpunt van die tafel vertel Percy vir sy pa van sy verslag oor hekseketelbodems.

"Ek het vir mnr. Crouch gesê dat dit teen Dinsdag gereed sal wees," sê Percy hoogdrawend. "Dit is 'n bietjie gouer as wat hy verwag het, maar ek hou daarvan om dinge klaar te maak. Ek dink hy sal dankbaar wees dat ek dit so gou afgehandel het. Ek bedoel, ons departement is tans ontsettend besig met al die reëlings wat vir die Wêreldbeker getref moet word. Ons kry net nie die ondersteuning van die Departement vir Magiese Sport en Ontspanning wat ons nodig het nie. Ludo Bagman –"

"Ek hou van Ludo," sê mnr. Weasley gelykmatig. "Dit was hy wat vir ons sulke goeie kaartjies vir die Beker gereël het. Ek het vir hom ook 'n gunsie gedoen: sy broer, Otto, het in die moeilikheid beland – 'n grasnier met bonatuurlike magte – maar ek het die hele ding uitgestryk."

"O, Bagman is natuurlik baie *aangenaam*," sê Percy afwysend, "maar hoe hy ooit hoof van 'n departement geword het . . . as ek hom met mnr. Crouch vergelyk! Ek kan nie sien hoe mnr. Crouch 'n lid van sy departement sal verloor sonder om eens te probeer uitvind wat gebeur het nie. Besef Pa dat Bertha Jurgens al vir langer as 'n maand vermis word? Sy het op vakansie na Albanië gegaan en net nie weer teruggekom nie."

"Ja, ek het vir Ludo daaroor uitgevra," sê mnr. Weasley fronsend. "Hy sê Bertha het al male sonder tal so weggeraak – hoewel, ek moet sê, as dit iemand in my departement moet wees, sal ek bekommerd wees . . ."

"O, Bertha is *hopeloos*, dis waar," sê Percy. "Ek verneem dat sy al vir jare van departement na departement geskuif word, baie meer moeite as wat sy werd is . . . maar tog, Bagman behoort haar te probeer vind. Mnr. Crouch het persoonlik betrokke geraak – sy het in 'n stadium in ons departement gewerk, Pa weet, en ek dink mnr. Crouch het nogal van haar gehou – maar Bagman lag dit af en sê sy't seker die kaart verkeerd gelees en in Australië pleks van Albanië beland. Hoewel," Percy slaak 'n diep sug en neem 'n groot sluk vlierblomwyn, "ons by die Departement van Internasionale Magiese Samewerking het genoeg om te doen sonder om nog lede van ander departemente ook te moet soek. Soos Pa seker weet, is daar *nog* 'n groot gebeurtenis wat ons kort na die Wêreldbeker moet reël."

Hy maak sy keel veelbetekenend skoon en staar af na die onderpunt van die tafel waar Harry, Ron en Hermien sit. "Pa weet immers waarvan ek praat." Hy lig sy stem so ietwat. "Die hoogs geheime een."

Ron rol sy oë en mompel vir Harry en Hermien, "Hy sukkel al van hy begin werk het om ons sover te kry om te vra wat die kastige gebeurtenis nou eintlik is. Waarskynlik 'n uitstalling van dikboomhekseketels."

In die middel van die tafel argumenteer mev. Weasley met Bill oor sy oorring, wat blykbaar 'n onlangse aankoop is.

"... met 'n aaklige groot slagtang daarop, regtig, Bill, wat sê hulle by die bank?"

"Ma, niemand by die bank traak in die minste hoe ek aantrek nie, solank ek genoeg skatte huis toe bring," sê Bill geduldig.

"En jou hare lyk werklik verspot, skat," sê mev. Weasley terwyl sy haar towerstaf liefderik streel. "Ek wens jy wil toelaat dat ek dit so 'n bietjie latsoen gee..."

"Ek hou daarvan," sê Ginny wat langs Bill sit. "Ma is so outyds. In elk geval, dis nie naastenby so lank soos professor Dompeldorius s'n nie..."

Langs mev. Weasley is Fred, George en Charlie besig om begeesterd oor die Wêreldbeker te praat.

"Ierland moet wen," mompel Charlie met 'n mond vol aartappels. "Hulle het Peru in die halfeindstryd platgeloop."

"Bulgarye het vir Viktor Krum, onthou," sê Fred.

"Krum is maar een ordentlike speler, Ierland het sewe," sê Charlie kortaf. "Ek wens darem Engeland het ingekom. Dit is so 'n verleentheid."

"Wat het gebeur?" vra Harry gretig, spyt oor sy isolasie van die towerwêreld wanneer hy in Ligusterlaan gekluister is. Harry is dol op Kwiddiek. Hy speel Soeker vir Huis Griffindor se Kwiddiekspan sedert sy eerste jaar by Hogwarts en besit 'n Vuurslag, een van die beste resiesbesems in die wêreld.

"Transilvanië het hulle driehonderd-en-negentig teen tien kafgedraf," sê Charlie grimmig. "Skokkende vertoning. En Wallis het teen Uganda verloor en Skotland is platgeloop deur Luxemburg."

Mnr. Weasley tower kerse op om die tuin wat al donkerder word, te verlig voor hulle hul poeding eet (tuisgemaakte aarbeiroomys) en teen die tyd dat hulle klaar is, fladder motte laag oor die tafels en ruik die warm lug na gras en kanferfoelie. Harry voel lekker versadig en uiters tevrede met die wêreld. Hy kyk hoe 'n klompie kabouters met Kromskeen op hul hakke tussen die roosbome rondnael terwyl hulle histories lag.

Ron loer versigtig na die bopunt van die tafel om seker te maak dat die res van die gesin besig is om te gesels voor hy baie sag vir Harry sê, "Het jy onlangs iets van Sirius gehoor?"

Hermien kyk om terwyl sy ook fyn luister.

“Ja,” sê Harry gedemp, “twee keer. Hy klink oukei. Ek het eergister vir hom geskryf. Hy sal dalk terugskryf terwyl ek hier is.”

Skielik onthou hy die rede waarom hy vir Sirius geskryf het en vir 'n oomblik oorweeg hy dit om vir Ron en Hermien te vertel dat sy litteken weer seer was en van die droom wat hom wakker gemaak het . . . maar hy is regtig nie lus om hulle te ontstel nie, nie nou terwyl hy so gelukkig en tevrede voel nie.

“Kyk hoe laat is dit,” sê mev. Weasley skielik terwyl sy na haar horlosie staar. “Julle moet in die bed kom, almal van julle, julle moet môre donsvordag opstaan om by die Wêreldbeker te kom. Harry, as jy jou skoollys vir my los, sal ek jou goed môre in Diagonaalstraat gaan kry. Ek kry al die ander s'n. Daar gaan nie baie tyd na die wedstryd wees nie; verlede keer het die wedstryd vyf dae geduur.”

“Sjoe – ek hoop dis hierdie keer ook so!” sê Harry entoesiasies.

“Wel, ek beslis nie,” sê Percy vroom. “Ek sidder by die gedagte aan die toestand van my in-mandjie as ek vir vyf dae van die werk moet weg wees.”

“H'm, iemand kan dalk weer draakbolle daarin sit, of hoe, Perce?” sê Fred.

“Dit was 'n monster van 'n Noorweegse bemestingstof!” sê Percy en hy word bloedrooi in die gesig. “Dit was niks *persoonliks* nie!”

“Dit was,” fluister Fred vir Harry toe hulle van die tafel af opstaan. “Ons het dit gestuur.”

CHAPTER SIX



THE PORTKEY

Harry felt as though he had barely lain down to sleep in Ron's room when he was being shaken awake by Mrs. Weasley.

"Time to go, Harry, dear," she whispered, moving away to wake Ron.

Harry felt around for his glasses, put them on, and sat up. It was still dark outside. Ron muttered indistinctly as his mother roused him. At the foot of Harry's mattress he saw two large, disheveled shapes emerging from tangles of blankets.

"'S' time already?" said Fred groggily.

They dressed in silence, too sleepy to talk, then, yawning and stretching, the four of them headed downstairs into the kitchen.

Mrs. Weasley was stirring the contents of a large pot on the stove,

while Mr. Weasley was sitting at the table, checking a sheaf of large parchment tickets. He looked up as the boys entered and spread his arms so that they could see his clothes more clearly. He was wearing what appeared to be a golfing sweater and a very old pair of jeans, slightly too big for him and held up with a thick leather belt.

“What d’you think?” he asked anxiously. “We’re supposed to go incognito — do I look like a Muggle, Harry?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, smiling, “very good.”

“Where’re Bill and Charlie and Per-Per-Percy?” said George, failing to stifle a huge yawn.

“Well, they’re Apparating, aren’t they?” said Mrs. Weasley, heaving the large pot over to the table and starting to ladle porridge into bowls. “So they can have a bit of a lie-in.”

Harry knew that Apparating meant disappearing from one place and reappearing almost instantly in another, but had never known any Hogwarts student to do it, and understood that it was very difficult.

“So they’re still in bed?” said Fred grumpily, pulling his bowl of porridge toward him. “Why can’t we Apparate too?”

“Because you’re not of age and you haven’t passed your test,” snapped Mrs. Weasley. “And where have those girls got to?”

She bustled out of the kitchen and they heard her climbing the stairs.

“You have to pass a test to Apparate?” Harry asked.

“Oh yes,” said Mr. Weasley, tucking the tickets safely into the back pocket of his jeans. “The Department of Magical Transportation had to fine a couple of people the other day for Apparating without a license. It’s not easy, Apparition, and when it’s not done properly it

can lead to nasty complications. This pair I'm talking about went and Splinched themselves."

Everyone around the table except Harry winced.

"Er — *Splined*?" said Harry.

"They left half of themselves behind," said Mr. Weasley, now spooning large amounts of treacle onto his porridge. "So, of course, they were stuck. Couldn't move either way. Had to wait for the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad to sort them out. Meant a fair old bit of paperwork, I can tell you, what with the Muggles who spotted the body parts they'd left behind. . . ."

Harry had a sudden vision of a pair of legs and an eyeball lying abandoned on the pavement of Privet Drive.

"Were they okay?" he asked, startled.

"Oh yes," said Mr. Weasley matter-of-factly. "But they got a heavy fine, and I don't think they'll be trying it again in a hurry. You don't mess around with Apparition. There are plenty of adult wizards who don't bother with it. Prefer brooms — slower, but safer."

"But Bill and Charlie and Percy can all do it?"

"Charlie had to take the test twice," said Fred, grinning. "He failed the first time, Apparated five miles south of where he meant to, right on top of some poor old dear doing her shopping, remember?"

"Yes, well, he passed the second time," said Mrs. Weasley, marching back into the kitchen amid hearty sniggers.

"Percy only passed two weeks ago," said George. "He's been Apparating downstairs every morning since, just to prove he can."

There were footsteps down the passageway and Hermione and Ginny came into the kitchen, both looking pale and drowsy.

“Why do we have to be up so early?” Ginny said, rubbing her eyes and sitting down at the table.

“We’ve got a bit of a walk,” said Mr. Weasley.

“Walk?” said Harry. “What, are we walking to the World Cup?”

“No, no, that’s miles away,” said Mr. Weasley, smiling. “We only need to walk a short way. It’s just that it’s very difficult for a large number of wizards to congregate without attracting Muggle attention. We have to be very careful about how we travel at the best of times, and on a huge occasion like the Quidditch World Cup —”

“George!” said Mrs. Weasley sharply, and they all jumped.

“What?” said George, in an innocent tone that deceived nobody.

“What is that in your pocket?”

“Nothing!”

“Don’t you lie to me!”

Mrs. Weasley pointed her wand at George’s pocket and said, “*Accio!*”

Several small, brightly colored objects zoomed out of George’s pocket; he made a grab for them but missed, and they sped right into Mrs. Weasley’s outstretched hand.

“We told you to destroy them!” said Mrs. Weasley furiously, holding up what were unmistakably more Ton-Tongue Toffees. “We told you to get rid of the lot! Empty your pockets, go on, both of you!”

It was an unpleasant scene; the twins had evidently been trying to smuggle as many toffees out of the house as possible, and it was only by using her Summoning Charm that Mrs. Weasley managed to find them all.

“*Accio! Accio! Accio!*” she shouted, and toffees zoomed from all

sorts of unlikely places, including the lining of George's jacket and the turn-ups of Fred's jeans.

"We spent six months developing those!" Fred shouted at his mother as she threw the toffees away.

"Oh a fine way to spend six months!" she shrieked. "No wonder you didn't get more O.W.L.s!"

All in all, the atmosphere was not very friendly as they took their departure. Mrs. Weasley was still glowering as she kissed Mr. Weasley on the cheek, though not nearly as much as the twins, who had each hoisted their rucksacks onto their backs and walked out without a word to her.

"Well, have a lovely time," said Mrs. Weasley, "and *behave yourselves*," she called after the twins' retreating backs, but they did not look back or answer. "I'll send Bill, Charlie, and Percy along around midday," Mrs. Weasley said to Mr. Weasley, as he, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny set off across the dark yard after Fred and George.

It was chilly and the moon was still out. Only a dull, greenish tinge along the horizon to their right showed that daybreak was drawing closer. Harry, having been thinking about thousands of wizards speeding toward the Quidditch World Cup, sped up to walk with Mr. Weasley.

"So how *does* everyone get there without all the Muggles noticing?" he asked.

"It's been a massive organizational problem," sighed Mr. Weasley. "The trouble is, about a hundred thousand wizards turn up at the World Cup, and of course, we just haven't got a magical site big

enough to accommodate them all. There are places Muggles can't penetrate, but imagine trying to pack a hundred thousand wizards into Diagon Alley or platform nine and three-quarters. So we had to find a nice deserted moor, and set up as many anti-Muggle precautions as possible. The whole Ministry's been working on it for months. First, of course, we have to stagger the arrivals. People with cheaper tickets have to arrive two weeks beforehand. A limited number use Muggle transport, but we can't have too many clogging up their buses and trains — remember, wizards are coming from all over the world. Some Apparate, of course, but we have to set up safe points for them to appear, well away from Muggles. I believe there's a handy wood they're using as the Apparition point. For those who don't want to Apparate, or can't, we use Portkeys. They're objects that are used to transport wizards from one spot to another at a prearranged time. You can do large groups at a time if you need to. There have been two hundred Portkeys placed at strategic points around Britain, and the nearest one to us is up at the top of Stoatshead Hill, so that's where we're headed."

Mr. Weasley pointed ahead of them, where a large black mass rose beyond the village of Ottery St. Catchpole.

"What sort of objects are Portkeys?" said Harry curiously.

"Well, they can be anything," said Mr. Weasley. "Unobtrusive things, obviously, so Muggles don't go picking them up and playing with them . . . stuff they'll just think is litter. . . ."

They trudged down the dark, dank lane toward the village, the silence broken only by their footsteps. The sky lightened very slowly as they made their way through the village, its inky blackness diluting

to deepest blue. Harry's hands and feet were freezing. Mr. Weasley kept checking his watch.

They didn't have breath to spare for talking as they began to climb Stoatshead Hill, stumbling occasionally in hidden rabbit holes, slipping on thick black tufts of grass. Each breath Harry took was sharp in his chest and his legs were starting to seize up when, at last, his feet found level ground.

"Whew," panted Mr. Weasley, taking off his glasses and wiping them on his sweater. "Well, we've made good time — we've got ten minutes. . . ."

Hermione came over the crest of the hill last, clutching a stitch in her side.

"Now we just need the Portkey," said Mr. Weasley, replacing his glasses and squinting around at the ground. "It won't be big. . . . Come on. . . ."

They spread out, searching. They had only been at it for a couple of minutes, however, when a shout rent the still air.

"Over here, Arthur! Over here, son, we've got it!"

Two tall figures were silhouetted against the starry sky on the other side of the hilltop.

"Amos!" said Mr. Weasley, smiling as he strode over to the man who had shouted. The rest of them followed.

Mr. Weasley was shaking hands with a ruddy-faced wizard with a scrubby brown beard, who was holding a moldy-looking old boot in his other hand.

"This is Amos Diggory, everyone," said Mr. Weasley. "He works for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical

Creatures. And I think you know his son, Cedric?”

Cedric Diggory was an extremely handsome boy of around seventeen. He was Captain and Seeker of the Hufflepuff House Quidditch team at Hogwarts.

“Hi,” said Cedric, looking around at them all.

Everybody said hi back except Fred and George, who merely nodded. They had never quite forgiven Cedric for beating their team, Gryffindor, in the first Quidditch match of the previous year.

“Long walk, Arthur?” Cedric’s father asked.

“Not too bad,” said Mr. Weasley. “We live just on the other side of the village there. You?”

“Had to get up at two, didn’t we, Ced? I tell you, I’ll be glad when he’s got his Apparition test. Still . . . not complaining . . . Quidditch World Cup, wouldn’t miss it for a sackful of Galleons — and the tickets cost about that. Mind you, looks like I got off easy. . . .” Amos Diggory peered good-naturedly around at the three Weasley boys, Harry, Hermione, and Ginny. “All these yours, Arthur?”

“Oh no, only the redheads,” said Mr. Weasley, pointing out his children. “This is Hermione, friend of Ron’s — and Harry, another friend —”

“Merlin’s beard,” said Amos Diggory, his eyes widening. “Harry? Harry *Potter*?”

“Er — yeah,” said Harry.

Harry was used to people looking curiously at him when they met him, used to the way their eyes moved at once to the lightning scar on his forehead, but it always made him feel uncomfortable.

“Ced’s talked about you, of course,” said Amos Diggory. “Told us

all about playing against you last year. . . . I said to him, I said — Ced, that'll be something to tell your grandchildren, that will. . . . *You beat Harry Potter!*”

Harry couldn't think of any reply to this, so he remained silent. Fred and George were both scowling again. Cedric looked slightly embarrassed.

“Harry fell off his broom, Dad,” he muttered. “I told you . . . it was an accident. . . .”

“Yes, but *you* didn't fall off, did you?” roared Amos genially, slapping his son on his back. “Always modest, our Ced, always the gentleman . . . but the best man won, I'm sure Harry'd say the same, wouldn't you, eh? One falls off his broom, one stays on, you don't need to be a genius to tell which one's the better flier!”

“Must be nearly time,” said Mr. Weasley quickly, pulling out his watch again. “Do you know whether we're waiting for any more, Amos?”

“No, the Lovegoods have been there for a week already and the Fawcetts couldn't get tickets,” said Mr. Diggory. “There aren't any more of us in this area, are there?”

“Not that I know of,” said Mr. Weasley. “Yes, it's a minute off. . . . We'd better get ready. . . .”

He looked around at Harry and Hermione.

“You just need to touch the Portkey, that's all, a finger will do —”

With difficulty, owing to their bulky backpacks, the nine of them crowded around the old boot held out by Amos Diggory.

They all stood there, in a tight circle, as a chill breeze swept over the hilltop. Nobody spoke. It suddenly occurred to Harry how odd

this would look if a Muggle were to walk up here now . . . nine people, two of them grown men, clutching this manky old boot in the semidarkness, waiting. . . .

“Three . . .” muttered Mr. Weasley, one eye still on his watch, “two . . . one . . .”

It happened immediately: Harry felt as though a hook just behind his navel had been suddenly jerked irresistibly forward. His feet left the ground; he could feel Ron and Hermione on either side of him, their shoulders banging into his; they were all speeding forward in a howl of wind and swirling color; his forefinger was stuck to the boot as though it was pulling him magnetically onward and then —

His feet slammed into the ground; Ron staggered into him and he fell over; the Portkey hit the ground near his head with a heavy thud.

Harry looked up. Mr. Weasley, Mr. Diggory, and Cedric were still standing, though looking very windswept; everybody else was on the ground.

“Seven past five from Stoatshead Hill,” said a voice.

Die Poortsleutel

Dit voel vir Harry asof hy so pas in Ron se kamer aan die slaap geraak het toe mev. Weasley hom wakker skud.

“Opstaantyd, Harry, skat,” fluister sy voor sy stap om Ron ook wakker te maak.

Harry voel na sy bril, sit dit op en kom orent. Dit is nog donker buite. Ron mompel binnensmonds toe sy ma hom wakker maak. Aan die voetentent van Harry se bed sien hy twee groot, vormlose bondels wat vanuit ’n warboel komberse orent sukkel.

“Issit tyd?” vra Fred slaperig.

Hulle trek in stilte aan, te vaak om te praat en toe, terwyl hulle hulself gapend uitrek, stap die vierstuks af kombuis toe.

Mev. Weasley roer die inhoud van ’n yslike pot op die stoof, terwyl mnr. Weasley by die tafel sit en ’n bondel perkamentkaartjies bestudeer. Hy kyk op toe die seuns inkom en hou sy arms ver van sy lyf sodat hulle sy klere beter kan sien. Hy dra iets wat soos ’n gholfrui lyk en ’n baie ou paar jeans wat effens te groot vir hom is en met ’n dik leergordel opgehou word.

“Hoe lyk dit vir julle?” vra hy angstig. “Ons is veronderstel om incognito te reis – lyk ek soos ’n Moggel, Harry?”

“Ja,” sê Harry en glimlag, “baie.”

“Waar is Bill en Charlie en Per-Per-Percy?” vra George, wat dit net nie regkry om ’n gaap te onderdruk nie.

“Wel, hulle appareer mos, dan nie?” sê mev. Weasley terwyl sy met die groot pot na die tafel sukkel en pap in die bakkies begin skep. “Hulle kan dus lekker laat lê.”

Harry weet dat dit baie moeilik is om te appareer; dit beteken dat ’n mens op die een plek verdwyn en feitlik onmiddellik op ’n ander plek verskyn.

“Hulle is dus nog in die bed?” sê Fred iesegrimmig terwyl hy sy papbord nader trek. “Hoekom kan ons nie ook appareer nie?”

“Omdat julle nog minderjarig is en nog nie jul toets geslaag het nie,” sê mev. Weasley kortaf. “Waar bly die meisies tog?”

Sy stommel uit die kombuis en hulle hoor hoe sy die trappe klim.

“’n Mens moet ’n toets slaag voor jy mag appareer?” vra Harry.

“O ja,” sê mnr. Weasley terwyl hy die kaartjies diep in sy jeans se agtersak druk. “Die Departement vir Magiese Vervoer moes nou die dag twee mense wat sonder lisensie geappareer het, beboet. Dis nie maklik om te appareer nie en wanneer dit nie behoorlik gedoen word nie, kan dit nare komplikasies hê. Die tweestuks na wie ek verwys, het hulself gesplink.”

Almal om die tafel behalwe Harry ril.

“H’m – *gesplink*?” vra Harry.

“Die helfte van hulself laat agterbly,” sê mnr. Weasley wat nou groot lepels vol melassestroop oor sy pap skep. “Was lelik in die knyp. Kon nie vorentoe of agtertoe nie. Moes vir die Taakmag vir die Regstelling van Toevallige Towery wag om hulle uit die penarie te help. Het ’n spul papierwerk tot gevolg gehad, dit verseker ek julle, want daar was Moggels wat van die liggaamsdele wat agtergebly het, gesien het.”

Harry het ’n skielike visioen van ’n paar bene en ’n oogbal wat verlate op die sypaadjie van Ligusterlaan lê.

“Het hulle reggekom?” vra hy ontsteld.

“O ja,” sê mnr. Weasley nugter. “Maar hulle is swaar beboet, en ek dink nie hulle sal gou weer so iets aanvang nie. Apparisie is nie ’n grap nie. Daar is talle volwasse towenaars wat dit nooit gebruik nie. Ver kies besems – stadiger, maar veiliger.”

“Maar Bill en Charlie en Percy kan dit doen?”

“Charlie moes die toets twee keer aflê,” sê Fred grinnikend. “Hy’t die eerste keer gedop. Het vyf kilometer suid van waar hy wou wees, geappareer, reg bo-op die een of ander ou tannie wat besig was om inkopies te doen, onthou julle?”

“Ja, wel, hy’t die tweede keer geslaag,” sê mev. Weasley, wat onder ’n hartlike gegiggel by die kombuis ingestap kom.

“Percy het maar twee weke gelede geslaag,” sê George. “Van daardie dag af appareer hy elke oggend ondertoe net om te wys hy kan.”

Daar is voetstappe onder in die gang en Hermien en Ginny kom die kombuis binne. Albei lyk bleek en deur die slaap.

“Hoekom moet ons so vroeg opstaan?” vra Ginny terwyl sy by die tafel gaan sit en haar oë vryf.

“Ons moet ’n entjie stap,” sê mnr. Weasley.

“Stap?” vra Harry. “Stap ons na die Wêreldbeker toe?”

“Nee, nee, dis myle ver,” sê mnr. Weasley glimlaggend. “Ons moet net ’n kort entjie stap. Dis net dat dit baie moeilik is vir ’n klomp towenaars om bymekaar te kom sonder om Moggels se aandag te trek. Op die beste van tye moet ons baie versigtig wees hoe ons reis, en by ’n groot geleentheid soos die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker –”

“George!” sê mev. Weasley skielik skerp sodat almal wip.

"Wat?" sê George in 'n onskuldige stem wat niemand flous nie.

"Wat's daar in jou sak?"

"Niks!"

"Moenie vir my lieg nie!"

Mev. Weasley steek haar towerstaf na George se sak uit en sê, "Accio!"

Verskeie klein, helderkleurige voorwerpe vlieg uit George se sak; hy gryp daarna, maar dis mis en hulle skiet tot in mev. Weasley se uitgestrekte hand.

"Ons het vir julle gesê om dit te vernietig!" sê mev. Weasley kwaai terwyl sy die Tontongtoffies in die lug hou. "Ons het vir julle gesê om ont-lae te raak van die goed! Maak leeg julle sakke, toe, toe, albei van julle!"

Dit is 'n onplesierige skouspel; die tweeling het duidelik probeer om soveel toffies moontlik uit die huis te smokkel en dit is net aan haar Ontbiedtowerspreuk te danke dat mev. Weasley daarin slaag om hulle almal te vind.

"Accio! Accio! Accio!" roep sy terwyl die toffies uit allerhande onwaarskynlike plekke spring, tot uit George se baadjie se voering en uit die onslae van Fred se jeans.

"Dit het ons ses maande gevat om hulle te skep!" skree Fred vir sy ma toe sy die toffies weggooi.

"O, wat 'n wonderlike manier om ses maande te mors!" gil sy. "G'n wonder julle het nie meer UILe gekry nie!"

Die atmosfeer is uiters gespanne toe hulle uiteindelik vertrek. Mev. Weasley is nog duidelik omgekrap toe sy vir mnr. Weasley op die wang soen, maar nie naastenby so erg soos die tweeling nie. Hulle hys hul rug-sakke op hul rûe en stap sonder 'n woord weg.

"Wel, geniet dit," sê mev. Weasley, "en *gedra vir julle*," roep sy agter die tweeling aan, maar hulle kyk nie om nie en antwoord ook nie. "Ek sal vir Bill, Charlie en Percy teen die middag se kant stuur," sê mev. Weasley vir mnr. Weasley toe hy, Harry, Ron, Hermien en Ginny oor die donker werf agter Fred en George aanstap.

Dit is koel en die maan is nog uit. 'n Dowwe, groen skynsel teen die horison aan hul regterkant is die enigste aanduiding dat dagbreek nie meer ver weg is nie. Harry, wat wonder oor die duisende towenaars wat hulle na die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker haas, stap 'n bietjie vinniger tot hy langs mnr. Weasley is.

"Hoe kom almal daar sonder dat die Moggels iets merk?" vra hy.

"Dis 'n geweldige organisatoriese saak," sug mnr. Weasley. "Die probleem is dat omtrent 'n honderdduisend towenaars vir die Wêreldbeker opdaag en ons beskik uit die aard van die saak nie oor 'n betowerde terrein wat groot genoeg vir almal is nie. Daar is natuurlik plekke wat die Moggels nie kan binnedring nie, maar probeer jou 'n honderdduisend towenaars in Diagonaalstraat voorstel, of op perron nege-en-'n-driekwart.

Gevolglik moes ons 'n verlate hoogland vind en soveel anti-Moggel-voorkomingsmaatreëls moontlik tref. Die hele Ministerie het maande lank hieraan gewerk. Eerstens moes ons natuurlik die aankomste versprei. Mense met goedkoper kaartjies moes al twee weke voor die tyd kom. 'n Beperkte aantal kan van Moggelvervoer gebruik maak, maar ons kan nie toelaat dat hulle die busse en treine oorstroom nie – moenie vergeet nie, die towenaars kom van regoor die wêreld. Sommige appareer natuurlik, maar ons moes veilige plekke vind waar hulle kon verskyn, ver weg van enige Moggels af. Ek verneem daar's 'n geskikte woud wat hulle as 'n apparisie-punt gebruik. Diegene wat nie wil of kan appareer nie, gebruik poortsleutels. Dit is voorwerpe wat gebruik word om towenaars op 'n vasgestelde tyd van een punt na 'n ander te vervoer. Indien nodig, kan groot groepe gelyk vervoer word. Tweehonderd poortsleutels is op strategiese plekke regoor Brittanje geplaas en die een naaste aan ons is op die kruin van Stoatsheadheuwel; dit is waarheen ons nou op pad is."

Mnr. Weasley wys vorentoe na waar 'n groot swart massa aan die ander kant van die dorpie Ottery St Catchpole verrys.

"Watter soort goed is poortsleutels?" vra Harry nuuskierig.

"Wel, dit kan enigiets wees," sê mnr. Weasley. "Onopvallende goed, natuurlik, sodat die Moggels dit nie optel en daarmee speel nie . . . goed wat hulle sal dink blote rommel is . . ."

Hulle strompel voort met 'n klam, donker laan na die dorp toe en net hul voetstappe verbreek die stilte om hulle. Die lug word stadigaan helderder terwyl hulle deur die dorp loop en die inkswart kleur verander in 'n helder diepblou. Harry se hande en voete is yskoud. Mnr. Weasley loer gedurig na sy horlosie.

Hulle mors nie asem om te praat toe hulle Stoatsheadheuwel eers begin uitklim en elke nou en dan in versteekte konyngate trap en oor ruie polle swart gras struikel nie. Elke asemteug wat Harry intrek, sny deur sy bors en sy bene is gereed om in te gee toe hulle uiteindelik op gelyk grond kom.

"Sjoe," blaas mnr. Weasley toe hy sy bril afhaal en aan sy trui afvee. "Wel, ons is meer as betyds – het nog tien minute . . ."

Hermien kom uiteindelik laaste oor die kruin van die heuwel en hou haar sy vas.

"Nou moet ons net die poortsleutel kry," sê mnr. Weasley. Hy sit sy bril terug en staar deur skrefiesoë na die grond. "Dit sal nie groot wees nie . . . komaan . . ."

Hulle sprei uit om te soek. Na slegs 'n paar minute skeur 'n kreet die stil lug.

"Hier, Arthur! Hier, seun, ons het dit!"

Twee lang figure is afgeteken teen die sterrehemel aan die ander kant van die heuwelkruin.

"Amos!" sê mnr. Weasley glimlaggend toe hy na die man wat geskree het, aanstap. Die res van hulle volg.

Mnr. Weasley skud hand met 'n towenaar wat 'n rooi gesig en 'n stoppelrige bruin baard het en 'n ou, muwwe stewel in sy ander hand vashou.

"Dit is Amos Diggory, julle almal," sê mnr. Weasley. "Werk vir die Departement vir die Regulering en Beheer van Magiese Kreature. Ek dink julle ken sy seun, Cedric?"

Cedric Diggory is 'n baie aantreklike seun van so sewentien. Hy is kaptein en Soeker van Hoesenproes se Kwiddiekspan by Hogwarts.

"Hallo," sê Cedric terwyl hy na hulle almal kyk.

Almal sê "Hallo" terug, behalwe Fred en George wat bloot knik. Hulle het nog nie vir Cedric vergewe na sy span die vorige jaar vir Griffindor in die eerste Kwiddiekwedstryd geklop het nie.

"Ver gestap, Arthur?" vra Cedric se pa.

"Nie te erg nie," sê mnr. Weasley. "Ons woon net aan die ander kant van die dorp, en julle?"

"Moes al twee-uur opstaan, nè, Ced? Ek sê jou, ek sal regtig bly wees wanneer hy die dag sy apparisietoets slaag. Maar nou ja . . . ek kla nie . . . die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker loop ek nie vir 'n sak vol Galjoene mis nie en dis omtrent wat die kaartjies kos. Aan die ander kant lyk dit of ek lig daarvan afgekom het . . ." Amos Diggory tuur goedig na die drie Weasley-seuns, Harry, Hermien en Ginny. "Almal joune, Arthur?"

"O nee, net die rooikoppe," sê mnr. Weasley terwyl hy sy kinders uitwys. "Dit is Hermien, 'n vriendin van Ron – en Harry, nog 'n maat –"

"So by my kool," sê Amos Diggory en sy oë rek. "Harry? *Harry Potter?*"

"H'm – ja," sê Harry.

Harry is gewoonnd daaraan dat mense hom skeef aankyk wanneer hulle hom ontmoet, gewoonnd aan die manier waarop hul oë dadelik na die weerligstraal-litteken op sy voorkop draai, maar dit laat hom nog steeds ongemaklik voel.

"Ced het natuurlik van jou gepraat," sê Amos Diggory. "Gesê hoe hy verlede jaar teen jou gespeel het . . . toe't ek vir hom gesê – Ced, dis nou iets om eendag vir jou kleinkinders te vertel . . . *dat jy vir Harry Potter geklop het!*"

Harry weet nie wat om hierop te sê nie, dus bly hy stil. Fred en George lyk albei weer grimmig. Cedric lyk ietwat verleë.

"Harry het van sy besem afgeval, Pa," mompel hy. "Ek het vir Pa gesê . . . dit was 'n ongeluk . . ."

"Ja, maar jy het nie afgeval nie, het jy?" brul Amos hartlik terwyl hy sy seun op die rug slaan. "Altyd beskeie, onse Ced, altyd die ware heer . . . maar die beste man het gewen, ek is seker Harry sal dit ook erken, nie waar nie? Die een val van sy besem af en die ander een nie; jy hoef nie 'n genie te wees om te weet watter een die beste ruiter is nie!"

“Moet amper tyd wees,” sê mnr. Weasley vinnig en haal sy horlosie weer uit. “Weet jy of ons vir enigiemand anders moet wag, Amos?”

“Nee, die Lovegoods is al ’n week lank daar en die Fawcetts kon nie kaartjies kry nie,” sê mnr. Diggory. “Daar is nie nog van ons hier in die omgewing nie, of is daar?”

“Nie sover ek weet nie,” sê mnr. Weasley. “Ja, nog net ’n minuut . . . ons moet gereed maak . . .”

Hy kyk om na Harry en Hermien. “Julle hoef net aan die poortsleutel te raak, dis al, ’n vinger is genoeg –”

Die lywige rugsakke sorg dat die negestuks met groot moeite saamdrom om die ou stewel wat Amos Diggory uithou.

Hulle staan in ’n klein kringetjie terwyl ’n koue windjie oor die heuweltop sny. Niemand praat nie. Dit tref Harry skielik hoe snaaks dit sal lyk as ’n Moggel onverwags op hulle moet afkom . . . nege mense, twee daarvan volwasse mans, wat in die skemerdonker aan ’n verslete ou skoën staan en vashou en wag . . .

“Drie . . .” mompel mnr. Weasley met een oog nog steeds op die horlosie, “twee . . . een . . .”

Dit gebeur onmiddellik. Dit voel vir Harry asof ’n haak net onder sy naeltjie skielik met geweld vorentoe geruk word. Sy voete verlaat die grond; hy voel vir Ron en Hermien aan weerskante van hom, hul skouers stamp teen syne; hulle seil deur die lug in ’n gehuil van wind en ’n warreling van kleur; sy voorvinger sit vas aan die stewel asof dit hom magneties vorentoe trek en toe –

Sy voete tref die grond; Ron steier tot teen hom en hy val vooroor; die poortsleutel tref die grond reg langs sy kop met ’n dowwe slag.

Harry kyk op. Mnr. Weasley, mnr. Diggory en Cedric staan nog regop, hoewel hulle uiters windverwaaid lyk; al die ander lê plat op die grond.

“Sewe minute oor vyf vanaf Stoatsheadheuwel,” sê ’n stem.

CHAPTER SEVEN



BAGMAN AND CROUCH

Harry disentangled himself from Ron and got to his feet. They had arrived on what appeared to be a deserted stretch of misty moor. In front of them was a pair of tired and grumpy-looking wizards, one of whom was holding a large gold watch, the other a thick roll of parchment and a quill. Both were dressed as Muggles, though very inexpertly: The man with the watch wore a tweed suit with thigh-length galoshes; his colleague, a kilt and a poncho.

“Morning, Basil,” said Mr. Weasley, picking up the boot and handing it to the kilted wizard, who threw it into a large box of used Portkeys beside him; Harry could see an old newspaper, an empty drinks can, and a punctured football.

“Hello there, Arthur,” said Basil wearily. “Not on duty, eh? It’s all

right for some. . . . We've been here all night. . . . You'd better get out of the way, we've got a big party coming in from the Black Forest at five-fifteen. Hang on, I'll find your campsite. . . . Weasley . . . Weasley . . .” He consulted his parchment list. “About a quarter of a mile's walk over there, first field you come to. Site manager's called Mr. Roberts. Diggory . . . second field . . . ask for Mr. Payne.”

“Thanks, Basil,” said Mr. Weasley, and he beckoned everyone to follow him.

They set off across the deserted moor, unable to make out much through the mist. After about twenty minutes, a small stone cottage next to a gate swam into view. Beyond it, Harry could just make out the ghostly shapes of hundreds and hundreds of tents, rising up the gentle slope of a large field toward a dark wood on the horizon. They said good-bye to the Diggorys and approached the cottage door.

A man was standing in the doorway, looking out at the tents. Harry knew at a glance that this was the only real Muggle for several acres. When he heard their footsteps, he turned his head to look at them.

“Morning!” said Mr. Weasley brightly.

“Morning,” said the Muggle.

“Would you be Mr. Roberts?”

“Aye, I would,” said Mr. Roberts. “And who're you?”

“Weasley — two tents, booked a couple of days ago?”

“Aye,” said Mr. Roberts, consulting a list tacked to the door.

“You've got a space up by the wood there. Just the one night?”

“That's it,” said Mr. Weasley.

“You'll be paying now, then?” said Mr. Roberts.

“Ah — right — certainly —” said Mr. Weasley. He retreated a

short distance from the cottage and beckoned Harry toward him. "Help me, Harry," he muttered, pulling a roll of Muggle money from his pocket and starting to peel the notes apart. "This one's a — a — a ten? Ah yes, I see the little number on it now. . . . So this is a five?"

"A twenty," Harry corrected him in an undertone, uncomfortably aware of Mr. Roberts trying to catch every word.

"Ah yes, so it is. . . . I don't know, these little bits of paper . . ."

"You foreign?" said Mr. Roberts as Mr. Weasley returned with the correct notes.

"Foreign?" repeated Mr. Weasley, puzzled.

"You're not the first one who's had trouble with money," said Mr. Roberts, scrutinizing Mr. Weasley closely. "I had two try and pay me with great gold coins the size of hubcaps ten minutes ago."

"Did you really?" said Mr. Weasley nervously.

Mr. Roberts rummaged around in a tin for some change.

"Never been this crowded," he said suddenly, looking out over the misty field again. "Hundreds of pre-bookings. People usually just turn up. . . ."

"Is that right?" said Mr. Weasley, his hand held out for his change, but Mr. Roberts didn't give it to him.

"Aye," he said thoughtfully. "People from all over. Loads of foreigners. And not just foreigners. Weirdos, you know? There's a bloke walking 'round in a kilt and a poncho."

"Shouldn't he?" said Mr. Weasley anxiously.

"It's like some sort of . . . I dunno . . . like some sort of rally," said Mr. Roberts. "They all seem to know each other. Like a big party."

At that moment, a wizard in plus-fours appeared out of thin air next

to Mr. Roberts's front door.

"Obliviate!" he said sharply, pointing his wand at Mr. Roberts.

Instantly, Mr. Roberts's eyes slid out of focus, his brows unknitted, and a look of dreamy unconcern fell over his face. Harry recognized the symptoms of one who had just had his memory modified.

"A map of the campsite for you," Mr. Roberts said placidly to Mr. Weasley. "And your change."

"Thanks very much," said Mr. Weasley.

The wizard in plus-fours accompanied them toward the gate to the campsite. He looked exhausted: His chin was blue with stubble and there were deep purple shadows under his eyes. Once out of earshot of Mr. Roberts, he muttered to Mr. Weasley, "Been having a lot of trouble with him. Needs a Memory Charm ten times a day to keep him happy. And Ludo Bagman's not helping. Trotting around talking about Bludgers and Quaffles at the top of his voice, not a worry about anti-Muggle security. Blimey, I'll be glad when this is over. See you later, Arthur."

He Disapparated.

"I thought Mr. Bagman was Head of Magical Games and Sports," said Ginny, looking surprised. "He should know better than to talk about Bludgers near Muggles, shouldn't he?"

"He should," said Mr. Weasley, smiling, and leading them through the gates into the campsite, "but Ludo's always been a bit . . . well . . . *lax* about security. You couldn't wish for a more enthusiastic Head of the sports department though. He played Quidditch for England himself, you know. And he was the best Beater the Wimbourne Wasps ever had."

They trudged up the misty field between long rows of tents. Most looked almost ordinary; their owners had clearly tried to make them as Muggle-like as possible, but had slipped up by adding chimneys, or bellpulls, or weather vanes. However, here and there was a tent so obviously magical that Harry could hardly be surprised that Mr. Roberts was getting suspicious. Halfway up the field stood an extravagant confection of striped silk like a miniature palace, with several live peacocks tethered at the entrance. A little farther on they passed a tent that had three floors and several turrets; and a short way beyond that was a tent that had a front garden attached, complete with birdbath, sundial, and fountain.

“Always the same,” said Mr. Weasley, smiling. “We can’t resist showing off when we get together. Ah, here we are, look, this is us.”

They had reached the very edge of the wood at the top of the field, and here was an empty space, with a small sign hammered into the ground that read WEEZLY.

“Couldn’t have a better spot!” said Mr. Weasley happily. “The field is just on the other side of the wood there, we’re as close as we could be.” He hoisted his backpack from his shoulders. “Right,” he said excitedly, “no magic allowed, strictly speaking, not when we’re out in these numbers on Muggle land. We’ll be putting these tents up by hand! Shouldn’t be too difficult. . . . Muggles do it all the time. . . . Here, Harry, where do you reckon we should start?”

Harry had never been camping in his life; the Dursleys had never taken him on any kind of holiday, preferring to leave him with Mrs. Figg, an old neighbor. However, he and Hermione worked out where most of the poles and pegs should go, and though Mr. Weasley was

more of a hindrance than a help, because he got thoroughly overexcited when it came to using the mallet, they finally managed to erect a pair of shabby two-man tents.

All of them stood back to admire their handiwork. Nobody looking at these tents would guess they belonged to wizards, Harry thought, but the trouble was that once Bill, Charlie, and Percy arrived, they would be a party of ten. Hermione seemed to have spotted this problem too; she gave Harry a quizzical look as Mr. Weasley dropped to his hands and knees and entered the first tent.

“We’ll be a bit cramped,” he called, “but I think we’ll all squeeze in. Come and have a look.”

Harry bent down, ducked under the tent flap, and felt his jaw drop. He had walked into what looked like an old-fashioned, three-room flat, complete with bathroom and kitchen. Oddly enough, it was furnished in exactly the same sort of style as Mrs. Figg’s house: There were crocheted covers on the mismatched chairs and a strong smell of cats.

“Well, it’s not for long,” said Mr. Weasley, mopping his bald patch with a handkerchief and peering in at the four bunk beds that stood in the bedroom. “I borrowed this from Perkins at the office. Doesn’t camp much anymore, poor fellow, he’s got lumbago.”

He picked up the dusty kettle and peered inside it. “We’ll need water. . . .”

“There’s a tap marked on this map the Muggle gave us,” said Ron, who had followed Harry inside the tent and seemed completely unimpressed by its extraordinary inner proportions. “It’s on the other side of the field.”

“Well, why don’t you, Harry, and Hermione go and get us some water then” — Mr. Weasley handed over the kettle and a couple of saucepans — “and the rest of us will get some wood for a fire?”

“But we’ve got an oven,” said Ron. “Why can’t we just —”

“Ron, anti-Muggle security!” said Mr. Weasley, his face shining with anticipation. “When real Muggles camp, they cook on fires outdoors. I’ve seen them at it!”

After a quick tour of the girls’ tent, which was slightly smaller than the boys’, though without the smell of cats, Harry, Ron, and Hermione set off across the campsite with the kettle and saucepans.

Now, with the sun newly risen and the mist lifting, they could see the city of tents that stretched in every direction. They made their way slowly through the rows, staring eagerly around. It was only just dawning on Harry how many witches and wizards there must be in the world; he had never really thought much about those in other countries.

Their fellow campers were starting to wake up. First to stir were the families with small children; Harry had never seen witches and wizards this young before. A tiny boy no older than two was crouched outside a large pyramid-shaped tent, holding a wand and poking happily at a slug in the grass, which was swelling slowly to the size of a salami. As they drew level with him, his mother came hurrying out of the tent.

“*How many times, Kevin? You don’t — touch — Daddy’s — wand — yecchh!*”

She had trodden on the giant slug, which burst. Her scolding carried after them on the still air, mingling with the little boy’s yells

— “You bust slug! You bust slug!”

A short way farther on, they saw two little witches, barely older than Kevin, who were riding toy broomsticks that rose only high enough for the girls’ toes to skim the dewy grass. A Ministry wizard had already spotted them; as he hurried past Harry, Ron, and Hermione he muttered distractedly, “In broad daylight! Parents having a lie-in, I suppose —”

Here and there adult wizards and witches were emerging from their tents and starting to cook breakfast. Some, with furtive looks around them, conjured fires with their wands; others were striking matches with dubious looks on their faces, as though sure this couldn’t work. Three African wizards sat in serious conversation, all of them wearing long white robes and roasting what looked like a rabbit on a bright purple fire, while a group of middle-aged American witches sat gossiping happily beneath a spangled banner stretched between their tents that read: THE SALEM WITCHES’ INSTITUTE. Harry caught snatches of conversation in strange languages from the inside of tents they passed, and though he couldn’t understand a word, the tone of every single voice was excited.

“Er — is it my eyes, or has everything gone green?” said Ron.

It wasn’t just Ron’s eyes. They had walked into a patch of tents that were all covered with a thick growth of shamrocks, so that it looked as though small, oddly shaped hillocks had sprouted out of the earth. Grinning faces could be seen under those that had their flaps open. Then, from behind them, they heard their names.

“Harry! Ron! Hermione!”

It was Seamus Finnigan, their fellow Gryffindor fourth year. He

was sitting in front of his own shamrock-covered tent, with a sandy-haired woman who had to be his mother, and his best friend, Dean Thomas, also of Gryffindor.

“Like the decorations?” said Seamus, grinning. “The Ministry’s not too happy.”

“Ah, why shouldn’t we show our colors?” said Mrs. Finnigan. “You should see what the Bulgarians have got dangling all over *their* tents. You’ll be supporting Ireland, of course?” she added, eyeing Harry, Ron, and Hermione beadily. When they had assured her that they were indeed supporting Ireland, they set off again, though, as Ron said, “Like we’d say anything else surrounded by that lot.”

“I wonder what the Bulgarians have got dangling all over their tents?” said Hermione.

“Let’s go and have a look,” said Harry, pointing to a large patch of tents upfield, where the Bulgarian flag — white, green, and red — was fluttering in the breeze.

The tents here had not been bedecked with plant life, but each and every one of them had the same poster attached to it, a poster of a very surly face with heavy black eyebrows. The picture was, of course, moving, but all it did was blink and scowl.

“Krum,” said Ron quietly.

“What?” said Hermione.

“Krum!” said Ron. “Viktor Krum, the Bulgarian Seeker!”

“He looks really grumpy,” said Hermione, looking around at the many Krums blinking and scowling at them.

“‘*Really grumpy*’?” Ron raised his eyes to the heavens. “Who cares what he looks like? He’s unbelievable. He’s really young too.”

Only just eighteen or something. He's a *genius*, you wait until tonight, you'll see."

There was already a small queue for the tap in the corner of the field. Harry, Ron, and Hermione joined it, right behind a pair of men who were having a heated argument. One of them was a very old wizard who was wearing a long flowery nightgown. The other was clearly a Ministry wizard; he was holding out a pair of pinstriped trousers and almost crying with exasperation.

"Just put them on, Archie, there's a good chap. You can't walk around like that, the Muggle at the gate's already getting suspicious ____"

"I bought this in a Muggle shop," said the old wizard stubbornly. "Muggles wear them."

"Muggle *women* wear them, Archie, not the men, they wear *these*," said the Ministry wizard, and he brandished the pinstriped trousers.

"I'm not putting them on," said old Archie in indignation. "I like a healthy breeze 'round my privates, thanks."

Hermione was overcome with such a strong fit of the giggles at this point that she had to duck out of the queue and only returned when Archie had collected his water and moved away.

Walking more slowly now, because of the weight of the water, they made their way back through the campsite. Here and there, they saw more familiar faces: other Hogwarts students with their families. Oliver Wood, the old Captain of Harry's House Quidditch team, who had just left Hogwarts, dragged Harry over to his parents' tent to introduce him, and told him excitedly that he had just been signed to the Puddlemere United reserve team. Next they were hailed by Ernie

Macmillan, a Hufflepuff fourth year, and a little farther on they saw Cho Chang, a very pretty girl who played Seeker on the Ravenclaw team. She waved and smiled at Harry, who slopped quite a lot of water down his front as he waved back. More to stop Ron from smirking than anything, Harry hurriedly pointed out a large group of teenagers whom he had never seen before.

“Who d’you reckon they are?” he said. “They don’t go to Hogwarts, do they?”

“Spect they go to some foreign school,” said Ron. “I know there are others. Never met anyone who went to one, though. Bill had a penfriend at a school in Brazil . . . this was years and years ago . . . and he wanted to go on an exchange trip but Mum and Dad couldn’t afford it. His penfriend got all offended when he said he wasn’t going and sent him a cursed hat. It made his ears shrivel up.”

Harry laughed but didn’t voice the amazement he felt at hearing about other Wizarding schools. He supposed, now that he saw representatives of so many nationalities in the campsite, that he had been stupid never to realize that Hogwarts couldn’t be the only one. He glanced at Hermione, who looked utterly unsurprised by the information. No doubt she had run across the news about other Wizarding schools in some book or other.

“You’ve been ages,” said George when they finally got back to the Weasleys’ tents.

“Met a few people,” said Ron, setting the water down. “You not got that fire started yet?”

“Dad’s having fun with the matches,” said Fred.

Mr. Weasley was having no success at all in lighting the fire, but it

wasn't for lack of trying. Splintered matches littered the ground around him, but he looked as though he was having the time of his life.

"Oops!" he said as he managed to light a match and promptly dropped it in surprise.

"Come here, Mr. Weasley," said Hermione kindly, taking the box from him, and showing him how to do it properly.

At last they got the fire lit, though it was at least another hour before it was hot enough to cook anything. There was plenty to watch while they waited, however. Their tent seemed to be pitched right alongside a kind of thoroughfare to the field, and Ministry members kept hurrying up and down it, greeting Mr. Weasley cordially as they passed. Mr. Weasley kept up a running commentary, mainly for Harry's and Hermione's benefit; his own children knew too much about the Ministry to be greatly interested.

"That was Cuthbert Mockridge, Head of the Goblin Liaison Office. . . . Here comes Gilbert Wimple; he's with the Committee on Experimental Charms; he's had those horns for a while now. . . . Hello, Arnie . . . Arnold Peasegood, he's an Obliviator — member of the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad, you know. . . . and that's Bode and Croaker . . . they're Unspeakables. . . ."

"They're what?"

"From the Department of Mysteries, top secret, no idea what they get up to. . . ."

At last, the fire was ready, and they had just started cooking eggs and sausages when Bill, Charlie, and Percy came strolling out of the woods toward them.

“Just Apparated, Dad,” said Percy loudly. “Ah, excellent, lunch!”

They were halfway through their plates of eggs and sausages when Mr. Weasley jumped to his feet, waving and grinning at a man who was striding toward them. “Aha!” he said. “The man of the moment! Ludo!”

Ludo Bagman was easily the most noticeable person Harry had seen so far, even including old Archie in his flowered nightdress. He was wearing long Quidditch robes in thick horizontal stripes of bright yellow and black. An enormous picture of a wasp was splashed across his chest. He had the look of a powerfully built man gone slightly to seed; the robes were stretched tightly across a large belly he surely had not had in the days when he had played Quidditch for England. His nose was squashed (probably broken by a stray Bludger, Harry thought), but his round blue eyes, short blond hair, and rosy complexion made him look like a very overgrown schoolboy.

“Ahoy there!” Bagman called happily. He was walking as though he had springs attached to the balls of his feet and was plainly in a state of wild excitement.

“Arthur, old man,” he puffed as he reached the campfire, “what a day, eh? What a day! Could we have asked for more perfect weather? A cloudless night coming . . . and hardly a hiccough in the arrangements. . . . Not much for me to do!”

Behind him, a group of haggard-looking Ministry wizards rushed past, pointing at the distant evidence of some sort of a magical fire that was sending violet sparks twenty feet into the air.

Percy hurried forward with his hand outstretched. Apparently his

disapproval of the way Ludo Bagman ran his department did not prevent him from wanting to make a good impression.

“Ah — yes,” said Mr. Weasley, grinning, “this is my son Percy. He’s just started at the Ministry — and this is Fred — no, George, sorry — *that’s* Fred — Bill, Charlie, Ron — my daughter, Ginny — and Ron’s friends, Hermione Granger and Harry Potter.”

Bagman did the smallest of double takes when he heard Harry’s name, and his eyes performed the familiar flick upward to the scar on Harry’s forehead.

“Everyone,” Mr. Weasley continued, “this is Ludo Bagman, you know who he is, it’s thanks to him we’ve got such good tickets —”

Bagman beamed and waved his hand as if to say it had been nothing.

“Fancy a flutter on the match, Arthur?” he said eagerly, jingling what seemed to be a large amount of gold in the pockets of his yellow-and-black robes. “I’ve already got Roddy Pontner betting me Bulgaria will score first — I offered him nice odds, considering Ireland’s front three are the strongest I’ve seen in years — and little Agatha Timms has put up half shares in her eel farm on a week-long match.”

“Oh . . . go on then,” said Mr. Weasley. “Let’s see . . . a Galleon on Ireland to win?”

“A Galleon?” Ludo Bagman looked slightly disappointed, but recovered himself. “Very well, very well . . . any other takers?”

“They’re a bit young to be gambling,” said Mr. Weasley. “Molly wouldn’t like —”

“We’ll bet thirty-seven Galleons, fifteen Sickles, three Knuts,”

said Fred as he and George quickly pooled all their money, “that Ireland wins — but Viktor Krum gets the Snitch. Oh and we’ll throw in a fake wand.”

“You don’t want to go showing Mr. Bagman rubbish like that —” Percy hissed, but Bagman didn’t seem to think the wand was rubbish at all; on the contrary, his boyish face shone with excitement as he took it from Fred, and when the wand gave a loud squawk and turned into a rubber chicken, Bagman roared with laughter.

“Excellent! I haven’t seen one that convincing in years! I’d pay five Galleons for that!”

Percy froze in an attitude of stunned disapproval.

“Boys,” said Mr. Weasley under his breath, “I don’t want you betting. . . . That’s all your savings. . . . Your mother —”

“Don’t be a spoilsport, Arthur!” boomed Ludo Bagman, rattling his pockets excitedly. “They’re old enough to know what they want! You reckon Ireland will win but Krum’ll get the Snitch? Not a chance, boys, not a chance. . . . I’ll give you excellent odds on that one. . . . We’ll add five Galleons for the funny wand, then, shall we. . . .”

Mr. Weasley looked on helplessly as Ludo Bagman whipped out a notebook and quill and began jotting down the twins’ names.

“Cheers,” said George, taking the slip of parchment Bagman handed him and tucking it away carefully. Bagman turned most cheerfully back to Mr. Weasley.

“Couldn’t do me a brew, I suppose? I’m keeping an eye out for Barty Crouch. My Bulgarian opposite number’s making difficulties, and I can’t understand a word he’s saying. Barty’ll be able to sort it out. He speaks about a hundred and fifty languages.”

“Mr. Crouch?” said Percy, suddenly abandoning his look of poker-stiff disapproval and positively writhing with excitement. “He speaks over two hundred! Mermish and Gobbledegook and Troll . . .”

“Anyone can speak Troll,” said Fred dismissively. “All you have to do is point and grunt.”

Percy threw Fred an extremely nasty look and stoked the fire vigorously to bring the kettle back to the boil.

“Any news of Bertha Jorkins yet, Ludo?” Mr. Weasley asked as Bagman settled himself down on the grass beside them all.

“Not a dicky bird,” said Bagman comfortably. “But she’ll turn up. Poor old Bertha . . . memory like a leaky cauldron and no sense of direction. Lost, you take my word for it. She’ll wander back into the office sometime in October, thinking it’s still July.”

“You don’t think it might be time to send someone to look for her?” Mr. Weasley suggested tentatively as Percy handed Bagman his tea.

“Barty Crouch keeps saying that,” said Bagman, his round eyes widening innocently, “but we really can’t spare anyone at the moment. Oh — talk of the devil! Barty!”

A wizard had just Apparated at their fireside, and he could not have made more of a contrast with Ludo Bagman, sprawled on the grass in his old Wasp robes. Barty Crouch was a stiff, upright, elderly man, dressed in an impeccably crisp suit and tie. The parting in his short gray hair was almost unnaturally straight, and his narrow toothbrush mustache looked as though he trimmed it using a slide rule. His shoes were very highly polished. Harry could see at once why Percy idolized him. Percy was a great believer in rigidly following rules, and Mr. Crouch had complied with the rule about

Muggle dressing so thoroughly that he could have passed for a bank manager; Harry doubted even Uncle Vernon would have spotted him for what he really was.

“Pull up a bit of grass, Barty,” said Ludo brightly, patting the ground beside him.

“No thank you, Ludo,” said Crouch, and there was a bite of impatience in his voice. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere. The Bulgarians are insisting we add another twelve seats to the Top Box.”

“Oh is *that* what they’re after?” said Bagman. “I thought the chap was asking to borrow a pair of tweezers. Bit of a strong accent.”

“Mr. Crouch!” said Percy breathlessly, sunk into a kind of half-bow that made him look like a hunchback. “Would you like a cup of tea?”

“Oh,” said Mr. Crouch, looking over at Percy in mild surprise. “Yes — thank you, Weatherby.”

Fred and George choked into their own cups. Percy, very pink around the ears, busied himself with the kettle.

“Oh and I’ve been wanting a word with you too, Arthur,” said Mr. Crouch, his sharp eyes falling upon Mr. Weasley. “Ali Bashir’s on the warpath. He wants a word with you about your embargo on flying carpets.”

Mr. Weasley heaved a deep sigh.

“I sent him an owl about that just last week. If I’ve told him once I’ve told him a hundred times: Carpets are defined as a Muggle Artifact by the Registry of Proscribed Charmable Objects, but will he listen?”

“I doubt it,” said Mr. Crouch, accepting a cup from Percy. “He’s desperate to export here.”

“Well, they’ll never replace brooms in Britain, will they?” said Bagman.

“Ali thinks there’s a niche in the market for a family vehicle,” said Mr. Crouch. “I remember my grandfather had an Axminster that could seat twelve — but that was before carpets were banned, of course.”

He spoke as though he wanted to leave nobody in any doubt that all his ancestors had abided strictly by the law.

“So, been keeping busy, Barty?” said Bagman breezily.

“Fairly,” said Mr. Crouch dryly. “Organizing Portkeys across five continents is no mean feat, Ludo.”

“I expect you’ll both be glad when this is over?” said Mr. Weasley.

Ludo Bagman looked shocked.

“Glad! Don’t know when I’ve had more fun. . . . Still, it’s not as though we haven’t got anything to look forward to, eh, Barty? Eh? Plenty left to organize, eh?”

Mr. Crouch raised his eyebrows at Bagman.

“We agreed not to make the announcement until all the details —”

“Oh details!” said Bagman, waving the word away like a cloud of midges. “They’ve signed, haven’t they? They’ve agreed, haven’t they? I bet you anything these kids’ll know soon enough anyway. I mean, it’s happening at Hogwarts —”

“Ludo, we need to meet the Bulgarians, you know,” said Mr. Crouch sharply, cutting Bagman’s remarks short. “Thank you for the tea, Weatherby.”

He pushed his undrunk tea back at Percy and waited for Ludo to rise; Bagman struggled to his feet, swigging down the last of his tea, the gold in his pockets chinking merrily.

“See you all later!” he said. “You’ll be up in the Top Box with me — I’m commentating!” He waved, Barty Crouch nodded curtly, and both of them Disapparated.

“What’s happening at Hogwarts, Dad?” said Fred at once. “What were they talking about?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” said Mr. Weasley, smiling.

“It’s classified information, until such time as the Ministry decides to release it,” said Percy stiffly. “Mr. Crouch was quite right not to disclose it.”

“Oh shut up, Weatherby,” said Fred.

A sense of excitement rose like a palpable cloud over the campsite as the afternoon wore on. By dusk, the still summer air itself seemed to be quivering with anticipation, and as darkness spread like a curtain over the thousands of waiting wizards, the last vestiges of pretense disappeared: The Ministry seemed to have bowed to the inevitable and stopped fighting the signs of blatant magic now breaking out everywhere.

Salesmen were Apparating every few feet, carrying trays and pushing carts full of extraordinary merchandise. There were luminous rosettes — green for Ireland, red for Bulgaria — which were squealing the names of the players, pointed green hats bedecked with dancing shamrocks, Bulgarian scarves adorned with lions that really roared, flags from both countries that played their national anthems as they were waved; there were tiny models of Firebolts that really

flew, and collectible figures of famous players, which strolled across the palm of your hand, preening themselves.

“Been saving my pocket money all summer for this,” Ron told Harry as they and Hermione strolled through the salesmen, buying souvenirs. Though Ron purchased a dancing shamrock hat and a large green rosette, he also bought a small figure of Viktor Krum, the Bulgarian Seeker. The miniature Krum walked backward and forward over Ron’s hand, scowling up at the green rosette above him.

“Wow, look at these!” said Harry, hurrying over to a cart piled high with what looked like brass binoculars, except that they were covered with all sorts of weird knobs and dials.

“Omnioculars,” said the saleswizard eagerly. “You can replay action . . . slow everything down . . . and they flash up a play-by-play breakdown if you need it. Bargain — ten Galleons each.”

“Wish I hadn’t bought this now,” said Ron, gesturing at his dancing shamrock hat and gazing longingly at the Omnioculars.

“Three pairs,” said Harry firmly to the wizard.

“No — don’t bother,” said Ron, going red. He was always touchy about the fact that Harry, who had inherited a small fortune from his parents, had much more money than he did.

“You won’t be getting anything for Christmas,” Harry told him, thrusting Omnioculars into his and Hermione’s hands. “For about ten years, mind.”

“Fair enough,” said Ron, grinning.

“Oooh, thanks, Harry,” said Hermione. “And I’ll get us some programs, look —”

Their money bags considerably lighter, they went back to the tents. Bill, Charlie, and Ginny were all sporting green rosettes too, and Mr. Weasley was carrying an Irish flag. Fred and George had no souvenirs as they had given Bagman all their gold.

And then a deep, booming gong sounded somewhere beyond the woods, and at once, green and red lanterns blazed into life in the trees, lighting a path to the field.

“It’s time!” said Mr. Weasley, looking as excited as any of them. “Come on, let’s go!”

Bagman en Crouch

Harry woel homself los van Ron en kom orent. Hulle het aangekom op wat na 'n verlate en mistige hoogland lyk. Voor hulle staan twee uitgeputte en iesegrimmige towenaars; die een hou 'n groot goue horlosie vas en die ander een 'n dik rol perkament en 'n veerpen. Albei is soos Moggels aangetrek, maar nie baie suksesvol nie. Die man met die horlosie dra 'n tweedpak met heuplengte-oorskoene, sy kollega 'n Skotse rokkie en 'n poncho.

“Môre, Basil,” sê mnr. Weasley. Hy tel die stewel op en gee dit vir die towenaar in die Skotse rokkie aan, wat dit in 'n groot doos vol gebruikte poortsleutels langs hom gooi. Harry sien 'n ou koerant, 'n leë koeldrankblikkie en 'n pap voetbal.

“Hallo daar, Arthur,” sê Basil moeg. “Nie op diens nie, h'm? Baie lekker vir party mense . . . ons is al die hele nag hier . . . Jy moet uit die pad kom, ons verwag 'n groot geselskap vanuit die Swartwoud teen kwart oor vyf. Wag eers, ek kry jul kampeerplek . . . Weasley . . . Weasley . . .” Hy bestudeer die perkamentlys. “So vyfhonderd meter hiervandaan, die eerste veld waarby julle kom. Kampbestuurder is ene mnr. Roberts. Digory . . . tweede veld . . . vra vir mnr. Payne.”

“Dankie, Basil,” sê mnr. Weasley en hy wys dat almal hom moet volg.

Hulle loop oor die verlate hoogland. Dis so mistig dat hulle nie eintlik iets kan uitmaak nie. Na omtrent twintig minute kom 'n klein kliphuisie langs 'n hek in sig. Aan die ander kant daarvan kan Harry net-net die spookagtige vorms van honderde en honderde tente uitmaak wat teen 'n skotige helling van 'n groot veld na 'n donker woud op die horison opstyg.

In die deur staan 'n man oor die tente en uitkyk. Sommer met die eerste oogopslag weet Harry dat dit die enigste ware Moggel in die omtrek is. Toe hy hul voetstappe hoor, draai hy sy kop na hulle toe.

“Goeiemôre!” sê mnr. Weasley hartlik.

“Môre,” sê die Moggel.

“Is u dalk mnr. Roberts?”

“Ja, ek is,” sê die Moggel. “Wie is julle?”

“Weasley – twee tente, ’n paar dae gelede bespreek?”

“Ja,” sê mnr. Roberts en kyk na ’n lys wat teen die deur vasgeplak is. “Julle plek is daar bo by die bos. Net die een nag?”

“Dis reg,” sê mnr. Weasley.

“Gaan jy nou betaal?” vra mnr. Roberts.

“Ja – goed – sekerlik –” sê mnr. Weasley. Hy stap ’n klein entjie weg van die kothuis af en wink vir Harry nader. “Help my, Harry,” mompel hy terwyl hy ’n rol Moggelgeld uit sy sak haal en die note begin losmaak. “Hierdie een is ’n – ’n – ’n tien? A, ja, daar’s die syfer . . . dan is dit ’n vyf?”

“’n Twintig,” help Harry hom in ’n fluisterstem reg, ongemaklik bewus van mnr. Roberts wat elke woord probeer hoor.

“Ja, ja, so is dit . . . ek weet darem nie, hierdie klein stukkies papier . . .”

“Is julle buitelanders?” vra mnr. Roberts toe mnr. Weasley met die korrekte bedrag terugkom.

“Buitelanders?” herhaal mnr. Weasley verward.

“Jy’s nie die eerste een wat met die geld sukkel nie,” sê mnr. Roberts terwyl hy ondersoekend na mnr. Weasley kyk. “So tien minute gelede was hier twee wat my met yslike goue munte so groot soos wieldoppe probeer betaal het.”

“Werklik?” sê mnr. Weasley senuagtig.

Mnr. Roberts krap in ’n blik vir kleingeld.

“Was nog nooit voorheen so vol nie,” sê hy skielik terwyl hy oor die mistige veld staar. “Honderde besprekings. Gewoonlik daag mense net op . . .”

“Sowaar?” sê mnr. Weasley en hou sy hand uit vir die kleingeld, maar mnr. Roberts gee dit nie vir hom aan nie.

“Ja,” sê hy peinsend. “Mense van oor die wêreld. Hordes buitelanders. En nie net toeriste nie. In die bol getiktes, jy weet? Tot een wat in ’n Skotse rokkie en ’n poncho rondloop.”

“Moet hy dan nie?” sê mnr. Weasley angstig.

“Dis soos die een of ander . . . laat ek dink . . . soos ’n soort saamtrek,” sê mnr. Roberts. “Dit lyk of almal mekaar ken. Soos ’n groot fees.”

Op daardie oomblik verskyn ’n towenaar in ’n posbroek uit die bloute reg langs mnr. Roberts se voordeur.

“*Obliviate!*” sê hy skerp en rig sy towerstaf op mnr. Roberts.

Onmiddellik gaan mnr. Roberts se oë uit fokus, die frons op sy voorkop verdwyn en ’n trek van dromerige gelatenheid verskyn op sy gesig. Harry herken die simptome as dié van iemand wie se geheue so pas gewysig is.

“’n Kaart van die kampeerterrein vir julle,” sê mnr. Roberts bedaar aan mnr. Weasley, “en jou kleingeld.”

“Baie dankie,” sê mnr. Weasley.

Die towenaar in die posbroek stap saam met hulle na die hek wat na

die kampeerterrein lei. Hy lyk stokflou; sy ken is blou van die stoppels en daar is donkerpers skaduwees onder sy oë. Toe hulle buite hoorafstand is, mompel hy teenoor mnr. Weasley, "Het baie moeilikheid met hom. Het omtrent tien keer per dag 'n Geheuetowerspreuk nodig om hom gelukkig te hou. En Ludo Bagman help ook nie. Loop oral rond en praat kliphard oor Mokers en Swelgers sonder om hom hoegenaamd aan anti Moggel-sekuriteit te steur. Genade, ek sal bly wees wanneer alles oor is. sien jou later, Arthur."

Hy disappareer.

"Ek dag mnr. Bagman is Hoof van Magiese Sport en Ontspanning?" sê Ginny verbaas. "Hy behoort mos te weet dat hy nie oor Mokers naby Moggels moet praat nie?"

"Hy behoort," sê mnr. Weasley glimlaggend en lei hulle deur die hekke na die kampeerterrein, "maar Ludo was maar nog altyd 'n bietjie . . . wel . . . laks as dit by sekuriteit kom. 'n Meer entoesiastiese Hoof van Sport en Ontspanning is daar egter nie. Hy het vir Engeland Kwiddiek gespeel, weet jy. En hy was die beste Breker wat die Wimbourne Wasps nog ooit gehad het."

Hulle loop met die mistige veld tussen lang rye tente op. Party lyk amper doodgewoon; hul eienaars het duidelik probeer om hulle soos Moggeltente te laat lyk, maar het klein glipsies gemaak deur skoorstene, klotoue of weerhane aan te las. Hier en daar is daar egter 'n tent wat so duidelik toweragtig is dat Harry nie verbaas is dat mnr. Roberts agterdogtig word nie. Halfpad op met die veld staan 'n uitspattige tent van gestrepte sy soos 'n miniatuurpaleis. By die ingang is verskeie lewende poue vasgemaak. 'n Ent verder gaan hulle verby 'n tent met drie verdiepings en verskeie torinkies; en 'n kort entjie verder is daar 'n tent met 'n voortuin, volledig met voëlbad, sonwyser en spuitfontein.

"Altyd dieselfde," sê mnr. Weasley met 'n glimlag, "ons kan dit nie weerstaan om te wil spog wanneer ons bymekaarkom nie. A, hier is ons, kyk, dis waar ons is."

Hulle is by die begin van die woud, heel aan die bopunt van die veld, en hier is 'n leë ruimte met 'n kleinerige bordjie wat in die grond geslaan is waarop "Weezly" staan.

"Kon nie 'n beter plek gekry het nie!" sê mnr. Weasley in sy noppies. "Die speelveld is net daar aan die ander kant van die bos, ons is so na as wat kan kom." Hy lig sy rugsak van sy skouers af. "Goed," sê hy opgewonde, "towery is verbode wanneer ons in sulke groot getalle op Moggelgrond is. Ons gaan hierdie tente met die hand opslaan! Behoort nie te moeilik te wees nie . . . Moggels doen dit gereeld . . . Hoor hier, Harry, waar dink jy moet ons begin?"

Harry het nog nooit gekamp nie; die Dursleys het hom nooit op enige vakansies geneem nie; hulle het verkies om hom by tant Freya, 'n

bejaarde buurvrou, te los. Hy en Hermien kan darem uitwerk waar die meeste van die pale en tentpenne moet kom en hoewel mnr. Weasley meer tot las as hulp is omdat hy heeltemal oeroggewonde raak wanneer die blokhamer gebruik word, kry hulle darem uiteindelik twee verslete tweemanstente staande.

Hulle staan almal terug om hul handewerk te bewonder. Niemand wat na hierdie tente kyk, sal ooit kan raai dat hulle aan towenaars behoort nie, dink Harry, maar die probleem is net dat daar tien van hulle sal wees wanneer Bill, Charlie en Percy ook arriveer. Dit lyk asof Hermien ook hieraan dink; sy loer onderlangs na Harry toe mnr. Weasley hande-vier-voet by die eerste tent inkrui.

“Ons sal so ietwat beknop wees,” roep hy uit, “maar ek reken ons sal inpas. Kom kyk.”

Harry buk, koes onderdeur die tentflap en voel hoe sy mond oopval. Hy is binne-in iets wat soos 'n outydse drievertrekwoonstel lyk, toegerus met 'n badkamer en 'n kombuis. Vreemd genoeg is dit presies in dieselfde styl as tant Freya se woonstel gemeubileer; daar is tot gehekelde kleedjies op onpaar stoele en dit ruik skerp na katte.

“Wel, dis net vir 'n kort tydjie,” sê mnr. Weasley en vee met 'n sakdoek oor sy pankop terwyl hy na die vier slaapbanke in die slaapkamer staar. “Ek het dit by Perkins van die kantoor geleen. Kampeer nie meer juis nie, arme man, lendejig.”

Hy tel die stowwerige ketel op en loer daarin. “Ons moet water kry . . .”

“Daar is 'n kraan gemerk op die kaart wat die Moggel vir ons gegee het,” sê Ron, wat agter Harry aan die tent binnegekom het en glad nie indruk lyk met die uitsonderlike binneafmetings nie. “Dis aan die ander kant van die veld.”

“Wel, hoekom gaan haal jy, Harry en Hermien nie vir ons water nie –” sê mnr. Weasley terwyl hy die ketel en 'n paar kastrolle vir hulle aangee, “– die res van ons sal hout soek vir die vuur.”

“Maar ons het 'n oond,” sê Ron, “hoekom kan ons nie net –?”

“Ron, anti-Moggel-sekuriteit!” sê mnr. Weasley, sy gesig stralend van afwagting. “Wanneer regte Moggels kampeer, kook hulle altyd buite op vure, ek het al gesien hoe hulle dit doen!”

Na 'n vinnige inspeksie van die meisies se tent, wat effens kleiner as die seuns s'n is, hoewel sonder die reuk van katte, sit Harry, Ron en Hermien af oor die kampeerterrein met die ketel en die kastrolle.

Noudat die son opkom en die mis aan die lig is, kan hulle die tentestad wat in alle rigtings strek behoorlik sien. Hulle stap stadig deur die rye en kyk nuuskierig om hulle rond. Dit begin nou eers tot Harry deurdring hoeveel hekse en towenaars daar in die wêreld moet wees; hy het nog nooit regtig aan dié wat in ander lande woon, gedink nie.

Hul medekampeerders begin nou ook wakker word. Die eerste om op te staan, is die gesinne met klein kindertjies; Harry het nog nooit sulke klein towenaartjies en heksies gesien nie. 'n Klein seuntjie wat niks ouer as twee kan wees nie, sit gehurk voor 'n groot piramiedvormige tent met 'n towerstaf in sy hand waarmee hy alte lekker aan 'n doplose slak in die gras sit en druk tot die slak later so dik soos 'n salami is. Toe hulle oorkant hom kom, kom sy ma haastig uit die tent.

“Hoeveel keer nog, Kevin? Jy mag – nie – met – Pappa – se – towerstaf speel – jig!”

Sy het op die reuseslak getrap wat oopgebars het. Haar berisping volg hulle op die stil oggendlug tesame met die klein seuntjie se krete – “Jy bars slak! Jy bars slak!”

'n Klein entjie verder sien hulle twee heksies, skaars ouer as Kevin, wat op speelgoedbesems ry wat net hoog genoeg opstyg sodat hul tone aan die dounat gras raak. 'n Towenaar van die Ministerie het hulle ook gesien en hy haas hom verby Harry, Ron en Hermien terwyl hy afgetrokke mompel, “Helder oordag! Die ouers slaap seker nog –”

Hier en daar kom volwasse towenaars en hekse uit hul tente om ontbyt te begin maak. Party kyk heimlik rond en toor dan vure met hul towerstawwe; ander trek vuurhoutjies met ongelowige uitdrukkings op hul gesigte asof hulle oortuig is dat dit nie sal werk nie. Drie towenaars uit Afrika is in 'n ernstige gesprek gewikkel; al drie dra lang wit gewade en braai iets wat soos 'n haas lyk oor 'n helderpers vuur, terwyl 'n groep middeljarige Amerikaanse hekse doodtevrede onder 'n met sterre besaaide banier sit en skinder. Die banier is tussen hul tente gespan en daarop staan: *Die Salem-instituut vir Hekse*. In die verbystap hoor Harry grepe van gesprekke in vreemde tale uit die tente om hulle en hoewel hy nie 'n woord verstaan nie, klink elke stem duidelik opgewonde.

“H'm – is dit my oë of het alles groen geword?” vra Ron.

Dit is nie net Ron se oë nie. Hulle is tussen 'n klomp tente wat almal onder 'n dik laag klawer toegegroeï is sodat dit lyk asof klein heuweltjies met vreemde fatsoene uit die aarde opgestoot het. Grinnikende gesigte kan onder die tente met oop flappe gesien word. Toe, van agter hulle, hoor hulle hul name.

“Harry! Ron! Hermien!”

Dit is Septimus Floris, 'n vierdejaar wat saam met hulle in Griffindor is. Hy sit voor sy eie klawerbedekte tent, saam met 'n vrou met rooierige hare wat sy ma moet wees en sy beste vriend, Dean Thomas, ook van Griffindor.

“Hou julle van die versierings?” sê Septimus grinnikend toe Harry, Hermien en Ron nader staan om te groet. “Die Ministerie is nie gelukkig nie.”

“En hoekom sal ons nie ons kleure wys nie?” sê mev. Floris. “Jy moet

sien wat alles aan die Bulgare se tente hang. Julle skree natuurlik vir Ierland, nè?" voeg sy by terwyl sy met kraalogies na Harry, Ron en Hermien staar.

Nadat hulle haar verseker het dat hulle inderdaad vir Ierland ondersteun, stap hulle aan, hoewel, soos Ron sê, "Asof ons iets anders sal sê tussen daardie spul."

"Ek wonder wat alles oor die Bulgare se tente hang," sê Hermien.

"Kom ons gaan kyk," sê Harry en wys na 'n groot klomp tente verder aan waar die Bulgaarse rooi-groen-en-wit vlag in die briesie wapper.

Hierdie tente is nie toegegroeï met plante nie, maar op elkeen is 'n plakkaat met dieselfde nors gesig en digte swart wenkbroue. Die prent beweeg natuurlik die hele tyd, maar al wat dit doen, is frons en gluur.

"Krum," sê Ron gedemp.

"Wat?" sê Hermien.

"Krum!" sê Ron. "Viktor Krum, die Bulgaarse Soeker!"

"Hy lyk regtig grimmig," sê Hermien terwyl sy omkyk na al die fronsende en glurende Krums.

"Regtig grimmig?" Ron lig sy oë ten hemele. "Wat maak dit saak hoe hy lyk? Hy's ongelooflik. Hy's regtig jonk ook. Skaars agtien. Hy's 'n genie, wag net tot vanaand, dan sal jy sien."

Daar is reeds 'n tou by die kraan in die hoek van die veld. Harry, Ron en Hermien val ook in, reg agter twee mans wat in 'n heftige argument gewikkel is. Die een is 'n baie ou towenaar wat 'n lang geblomde nagrok dra. Die ander een is duidelik 'n towenaar van die Ministerie; hy hou 'n strepiesbroek omhoog en is amper in trane van radeloosheid.

"Trek dit net aan, Archie, toe tog, jy kan nie so rondloop nie, die Moggel by die hek is klaar agterdogtig –"

"Ek het dit in 'n Moggelwinkel gekoop," sê die ou towenaar koppig. "Moggels dra sulke goed."

"Moggelvroumense dra dit, Archie, nie die mans nie, hulle dra dit," sê die towenaar van die Ministerie terwyl hy die strepiesbroek rondswaai.

"Daai ding trek ek g'n stuk aan nie," sê ou Archie verontwaardig. "Ek hou van 'n gesonde luggie om my boude, dankie."

Hermien kan haar lag nie hou nie en moet eenkant toe wegkoes. Sy kan eers weer na die ry toe terugkom toe Archie klaar water getap en weggestap het.

Die water is swaar en hulle stap stadig terug deur die kampterrein. Hier en daar sien hulle bekende gesigte: ander Hogwarts-studente met hul gesinne. Oliver Wood, die vorige kaptein van Harry se huis se Kwiddiekspan wat Hogwarts so pas verlaat het, sleep Harry na sy ouers se tent om hom voor te stel en vertel hom opgewonde dat hy so pas deur Puddlemere United se reserwespan gewerf is. Daarna groet Ernie Macmillan, 'n Hoesenproes-vierdejaar, hulle en 'n klein entjie verder sien hulle vir Cho

hang, 'n baie mooi meisie wat vir die Raweklouspan Soeker speel. Sy wani en glimlag vir Harry, wat 'n skeut water oor hom mors toe hy terugwani. Meer om Ron te laat ophou grinnik as om enige ander rede, wys Harry 'n groot groep tieners uit wat hy nog nooit tevore gesien het nie.

"Wie dink julle is hulle?" vra hy. "Hulle is nie in Hogwarts nie, nè?"

"Ek dink hulle kom van die een of ander uitlandse skool," sê Ron. "Ek weet daar is ander, hoewel ek nog nooit iemand teëgekom het wat na een gaan nie. Bill het eenkeer 'n penmaat by 'n skool in Brasilië gehad . . . dit was jare en jare gelede . . . en hy wou op 'n uitruilskema gaan, maar Ma en Pa kon dit nie bekostig nie. Sy penmaat het hom vervies toe hy sê dat hy nie kan kom nie, en het vir hom 'n hoed met 'n vloek op gestuur. Dit het sy ore laat opkrimp."

Harry lag, maar sê niks oor hoe verbaas hy is om van ander towenaarskole te hoor nie. Noudat hy so baie mense van soveel verskillende lande by die kampeerplek sien, besef hy dat hy dom was om nie te besef dat Hogwarts nie die enigste skool kan wees nie. Hy loer na Hermien wat glad nie verbaas lyk nie. Sy het ongetwyfeld al iewers in 'n boek oor ander towenaarskole gelees.

"Julle was eeue lank weg," sê George toe hulle uiteindelik by die Weasleys se tent aankom.

"Het 'n paar mense raakgeloop," sê Ron terwyl hy die water neersit. "Brand die vuur dan nog nie?"

"Pa speel nog met die vuurhoutjies," sê Fred.

Mnr. Weasley kry dit glad nie reg om die vuur aan te steek nie, maar dis omdat hy nie probeer nie. Gebreekte vuurhoutjies lê gesaai op die grond langs hom, maar hy lyk asof hy groot pret het.

"Oeps!" sê hy toe hy 'n vuurhoutjie uiteindelik getrek kry en dit onmiddellik weer van pure verbasing laat val.

"Gee hier, mnr. Weasley," sê Hermien hulpvaardig. Sy neem die dosie by hom en wys hom hoe om dit te doen.

Uiteindelik brand die vuur, hoewel dit nog 'n goeie uur neem voor dit warm genoeg is om op te kook. Daar is egter baie om na te kyk terwyl hulle wag. Dit lyk asof hul tent reg langs 'n soort deurgang na die speelveld staan. Lede van die Ministerie loop heen en weer verby en groet mnr. Weasley beleef in die verbygaan. Mnr. Weasley lewer deurlopende kommentaar, hoofsaaklik ter wille van Harry en Hermien; sy eie kinders weet te veel van die Ministerie om hoegenaamd belang te stel.

"Dit is Cathy Mocke, Hoof van die Gnoom-skakelkomitee . . . hier kom Gottlieb Wiid, hy's by die Komitee vir Eksperimentele Towerspreuke, daardie horings het hy 'n hele rukkie al . . . Hallo, Arnie . . . Arnold Peasegood, hy's 'n Uitwisser, lid van die Taakmag by Regstelling van Toevallige Towery, julle weet . . . en dit is Bouwer en Croaker . . . hulle is Onnoembares . . ."

“Hulle is wat?”

“Van die Departement van Geheimhouding, hoogs geheim, het nie ’n idee wat hulle doen nie . . .”

Die vuur is eindelijk gereed en hulle het net begin om eiers en wors gaar te maak toe Bill, Charlie en Percy deur die bos na hulle toe aangestap kom.

“So pas geappareer, Pa,” sê Percy luid. “A, uitstekend, middagete!” Hulle is halfpad deur hul borde vol eiers en wors toe mnr. Weasley orent spring en grinnikend vir ’n man wat na hulle toe aangestap kom, waai. “A!” sê hy. “Die man van die oomblik! Ludo!”

Ludo Bagman is vir seker die mees opvallende persoon wat Harry tot dusver gesien het, en dit sluit ou Archie met sy geblomde nagrok in. Hy dra ’n lang Kwiddiekmantel met breë, horisontale heldergeel en swart strepe. ’n Enorme prent van ’n perdeby pryk op sy bors. Hy lyk soos ’n eens sterkgeboude man wat homself verwaarloos het; die mantel span styf oor ’n groot maag wat hy beslis nie gehad het toe hy vir Engeland Kwiddiek gespeel het nie. Sy neus is platterig (waarskynlik gebreek deur ’n verdwaalde Moker, dink Harry), maar sy ronde blou oë, kort blonde hare en rosige gelaatskleur laat hom soos ’n te lank uitgegroeide skoolseun lyk.

“Hallo, daar!” roep Bagman uitgelate. Hy loop soos iemand wat vere onder sy voete het en dis duidelik dat hy baie opgewonde is.

“Arthur, my maat,” sê hy blasend toe hy by die kampvuur kom, “wat ’n dag, hè? Wat ’n dag! Kon nie vir beter weer gevra het nie. ’n Wolklose nag aan die kom . . . en feitlik niks wat haper met die reëlins nie . . . nie veel vir my om te doen nie!”

Agter hom kom ’n groepie afgeremde towenaars van die Ministerie haastig verby en wys in die verte na die een of ander towervuur wat pers vonke tien meter die lug in stuur.

Percy kom haastig en met ’n uitgestrekte hand nader. Dit lyk asof sy misnoeë met die manier waarop Ludo Bagman sy departement bestuur hom nie daarvan gaan weerhou om ’n goeie indruk te probeer maak nie.

“A – ja,” sê mnr. Weasley grinnikend, “dis my seun Percy; hy het so pas by die Ministerie begin – en dit is Fred – nee, George, jammer – dit is Fred – Bill, Charlie, Ron – my dogter, Ginny – en Ron se vriende, Hermien la Grange en Harry Potter.”

Bagman weifel effens toe hy Harry se naam hoor en sy oë draai op die bekende manier na die litteken op Harry se voorkop.

“Almal van julle,” gaan mnr. Weasley voort, “dit is Ludo Bagman, julle weet wie hy is, dit is aan hom te danke dat ons sulke goeie plekke het –” Bagman straal en waai met sy hand asof hy daarmee wil sê dat dit niks is nie.

“Wat van ’n ou weddenskappie op die uitslag, Arthur?” sê hy gretig,

terwyl hy 'n bedrag goud in die sakke van sy geel-en-swart kleed laat rinkel. "Rodney Pontner het my gewed Bulgarye sal die eerste doel aanteken – ek het hom goeie wedkanse aangebied siende dat Ierland se voor-
spelers die sterkste is wat ek in jare gesien het – en klein Agatha Timms wed halwe aandeel in haar palingplaas op 'n week lange wedstryd."

"O . . . goed dan," sê mnr. Weasley. "Laat ek sien . . . 'n Galjoen dat Ierland wen?"

"'n Galjoen?" Ludo Bagman lyk ietwat teleurgesteld, maar herstel gou weer. "Goed dan, goed dan . . . enige ander weddenskappe?"

"Hulle is 'n bietjie jonk om te dobbel," sê mnr. Weasley. "Molly sal nie daarvan hou as –"

"Ons wed sewe-en-dertig Galjoene, vyftien Sekels en drie Knoete," sê Fred terwyl hy en George gou al hul geld saamgooi, "dat Ierland wen – maar Viktor Krum gaan die Snip kry. O ja, en ons gooi 'n kultowerstaf ook in."

"Julle wil tog nie sulke bog vir mnr. Bagman staan en wys nie –" sis Percy, maar dit lyk asof Bagman glad nie dink dat die towerstaf bog is nie; intendeel, sy seunsagtige gesig straal van opgewondenheid toe hy dit by Fred neem, en toe die towerstaf hard kraai en in 'n hoender verander, brul Bagman van die lag.

"Uitstekend! Ek het lank laas een gesien wat so oortuigend is! Ek gee julle vyf Galjoene hiervoor!"

Percy word stokstyf en yskoud van afkeer.

"Seuns," sê mnr. Weasley onderlangs, "ek wil nie hê julle moet dobbel nie . . . al julle spaargeld . . . jul ma –"

"Moet tog nie so 'n ou pretbederwer wees nie, Arthur!" bulder Ludo Bagman terwyl hy sy sakke rinkelend skud. "Hulle is oud genoeg om te weet wat hulle doen! Julle reken dus dat Ierland gaan wen, maar dat Krum die Snip sal kry? Vergeet dit, seuns, vergeet dit . . . daarvoor sal ek julle 'n uitstekende wedkans aanbied . . . en ons sit vyf Galjoene by vir die towerstaf, nè?"

Mnr. Weasley kyk magteloos toe terwyl Ludo Bagman 'n notaboek uithaal en die tweeling se name neerskryf.

"Tot siens," sê George toe hy die stukkie perkament by Bagman neem en dit voor by sy kleed indruk.

Bagman is besonder opgeruimd toe hy weer na mnr. Weasley draai. "Hoe lyk dit met 'n koppie tee? Soek vir Barty Crouch. My Bulgaarse eweknie veroorsaak probleme, en ek verstaan nie 'n woord wat die man sê nie. Barty sal dit kan uitsorteer. Hy praat omtrent 'n honderd-en-vyftig tale."

"Mnr. Crouch?" sê Percy, wat sy laaistokagtige uitdrukking van afkeer net daar laat vaar en absoluut kriel van opgewondenheid. "Hy praat oor die tweehonderd tale! Meermins en Twakenbog en Trol . . ."

“Enigee kan Trol praat,” sê Fred neerhalend, “al wat ’n mens hoef te doen, is gebare maak en roggel.”

Percy gooi ’n uiters verergde blik na Fred en stook die vuur met mening om die ketel weer tot kookpunt te bring.

“Enige tyding van Bertha Jurgens, Ludo?” vra mnr. Weasley toe Bagman op die gras langs hulle gaan sit.

“Nie ’n dooie woord nie,” sê Bagman gelate. “Maar sy sal wel iewers uitslaan. Die arme Bertha . . . geheue soos ’n heksetel wat lek en geen sin vir rigting nie. Verdwaal, kyk wat ek vir julle sê. Sal hier iewers in Oktober by die kantoor ingewaai kom, vas oortuig dat dit nog Julie is.”

“Dink jy nie dit is tyd om iemand te stuur om haar te gaan soek nie?” stel mnr. Weasley huiwerig voor toe Percy vir Bagman sy tee aangee.

“Barty Crouch hou ook aan om dit te sê,” sê Bagman en sy ronde oë is onskuldig wydgeriek, “maar op die oomblik kan ons regtig niemand spaar nie. A – praat van die duiwel! Barty!”

’n Towenaar het pas langs hul vuur geappareer en hy kan nie ’n groter kontras wees met Ludo Bagman wat uitgestrek op die gras in sy ou Waspklere lê nie. Barty Crouch is ’n stywe, regop, bejaarde man in ’n onberispelike skoon pak en das. Die paadjie in sy kort gryshare is amper onnatuurlik reguit en sy smal tandeborselsnorretjie lyk asof hy ’n skuifliniaal gebruik wanneer hy dit sny. Sy skoene is blink gepoleer. Harry sien dadelik in waarom Percy hom bewonder. Percy glo aan reëls wat streng nagekom moet word, en mnr. Crouch het die reël aangaande die gebruik van Moggelklere so getrou nagekom dat hy maklik vir ’n bankbestuurder aangesien kan word. Harry twyfel of selfs oom Vernon sou kon raai wat hy in der waarheid is.

“Kom sit ’n bietjie, Barty,” sê Ludo opgeruimd en klap op die gras langs hom.

“Nee dankie, Ludo,” sê Crouch en daar is ’n bietjie ongeduld in sy stem. “Ek soek oral na jou. Die Bulgare dring daarop aan dat ons nog twaalf sitplekke by die boonste losie voeg.”

“O, is dit wat hulle wil hê?” sê Bagman. “Ek dag die vent wil ’n haartangetjie by my leen. Ietwat van ’n aksent.”

“Mnr. Crouch!” sê Percy uitasem en maak ’n buiging wat hom na ’n boggelrug laat lyk. “Wat van ’n koppie tee?”

“O,” sê mnr. Crouch terwyl hy effens verbaas na Percy kyk. “Ja – dankie, Weatherby.”

Fred en George stik in hul koppies. Percy se ore word baie pienk en hy raak vreeslik doenig met die ketel.

“O ja, ek wil nog met jou ook praat, Arthur,” sê mnr. Crouch toe sy skerp oë op mnr. Weasley val. “Ali Bashir is op die oorlogspad. Hy wil ’n woordjie met jou wissel oor jou verbod op vlieënde tapyte.”

Mnr. Weasley sug swaar. “Ek het net verlede week vir hom ’n uil daar-

oor gestuur. Ek het al male sonder tal vir hom gesê dat tapyte deur die Registrasiekantoor op Verbode Betowerde Voorwerpe as Moggel-artefakte geklassifiseer is, maar het hy ore?"

"Ek twyfel," sê mnr. Crouch toe hy 'n koppie tee by Percy neem. "Hy is desperaat om hierheen uit te voer."

"Wel, besems sal seker nooit in Brittanje vervang word nie, nè?" sê Bagman ligweg.

"Ali reken daar's 'n opening in die mark vir 'n gesinsvoertuig," sê mnr. Crouch. "Ek onthou dat my oupa 'n Axminster met plek vir twaalf gehad het – dit was natuurlik voor tapyte verbied is."

Hy praat asof hy geen ruimte vir twyfel wil laat dat al sy voorvaders hul streng by die wet gehou het nie.

"Jy bly dus besig, Barty?" sê Bagman lighartig.

"Redelik," sê mnr. Crouch droogweg. "Om poortsleutels oor vyf vastelande te reël, wil gedoen wees, Ludo."

"Ek wed julle sal bly wees as alles eers oor is," sê mnr. Weasley.

Ludo Bagman lyk geskok. "Bly! Ek weet nie wanneer laas ek soveel pret gehad het nie . . . hoewel, dis nie asof daar niks is om na uit te sien nie, hè, Barty? Nog baie om te organiseer, nè?"

Mnr. Crouch lig sy wenkbroue vir Bagman. "Ons het besluit om nie 'n aankondiging te maak voor al die besonderhede nie –"

"Ag, besonderhede!" sê Bagman terwyl hy die woord soos 'n wolk muggies uit die pad waai. "Hulle het geteken, het hulle nie? Hulle het ingestem, nie waar nie? Ek wed jou hierdie kinders sal alles in elk geval gou genoeg weet. Dit gaan immers by Hogwarts –"

"Ludo, ons moet die Bulgare gaan sien, weet jy," val mnr. Crouch vir Bagman skerp in die rede. "Dankie vir die tee, Weatherby."

Hy stoot sy ongedrinkte tee terug na Percy toe en wag dat Ludo moet opstaan; Bagman kom sukkelend orent, slaan die laaste paar slukke tee weg en laat die goud in sy sak vrolik rinkel.

"Sien julle later!" sê hy. "Julle is in die boonste losie saam met my – ek lewer kommentaar!" Hy wuif, Barty Crouch knik kortaf en hulle disappareer.

"Wat gaan by Hogwarts gebeur, Pa?" vra Fred dadelik. "Waaroor het hulle gepraat?"

"Julle sal gou genoeg weet," sê mnr. Weasley met 'n glimlag.

"Dit is geklassifiseerde inligting tot tyd en wyl die Ministerie besluit om dit vry te stel," sê Percy styf. "Mnr. Crouch was heeltemal reg om niks te sê nie."

"Ag, hou jou mond, Weatherby," sê Fred.

Soos die middag aanstap, styg die opwinding tot dit soos 'n voelbare wolk oor die kampeerterrein hang. Teen skemer voel dit asof die stil somerlug van afwagting bewe en toe die duisternis soos 'n gordyn oor die

duisende wagtende towenaars uitsak, verdwyn die laaste sweem van skyn: dit lyk asof die Ministerie die onvermydelike aanvaar het en opgehou het om teen die flagrante tekens van towery wat nou oral uitbreek, te stry.

Elke paar tree is daar verkoopsmense wat appaereer. Hulle het skinkborde en stootkarre vol wonderbaarlike handelsware. Daar is skitterende rosette – groen vir Ierland en rooi vir Bulgarye – wat die name van die spelers uitskree, gepunte groen hoede bedek met dansende klawers, Bulgaarse serpe versier met leeus wat regtig brul, vlae van albei lande wat hul landsliedere speel wanneer hulle gewaai word; daar is klein modelle van die Vuurslag wat regtig kan vlieg en figuurtjies van beroemde spelers wat oor jou handpalm loop en pronk om versamel te word.

“Het die hele vakansie my geld hiervoor gespaar,” sê Ron vir Harry toe hulle twee en Hermien tussen die verkoopsmense rondloop om aandenkings te koop. Hoewel Ron vir hom ’n dansende klaverhoed en ’n groot groen roset koop, koop hy ook ’n figuurtjie van Viktor Krum, die Bulgaarse Soeker. Die miniatuur-Krum loop vorentoe en agtertoe oor Ron se hand en grimlag vir die groen roset bo hom.

“Sjoe, kyk hier!” sê Harry en haas hom na ’n karretjie gelaai met goed wat soos bronsverkykers lyk, behalwe dat hulle vol eienaardige knoppe en wysers is.

“Omnikykers,” sê die verkoopstowenaar gretig. “Jy kan die aksie weer kyk . . . alles stadig laat gebeur . . . en hulle sal regstreekse kommentaar oor die wedstryd lewer as dit is wat jy wil hê. Winkoop – tien Galjoene elk.”

“Nou wens ek ek het dit nie gekoop nie,” sê Ron en beduie na die dansende klaverhoed, terwyl hy verlangend na die Omnikykers staar.

“Drie paar,” sê Harry ferm aan die towenaar.

“Nee – regtig, moenie,” sê Ron, rooi in die gesig. Hy is baie gevoelig daaroor dat Harry, wat ’n klein fortuin by sy ouers geërf het, meer geld het as hy.

“Julle kry niks vir Kersfees nie,” sê Harry vir hom toe hy die Omnikykers in sy en Hermien se hande druk. “Vir omtrent die volgende tien jaar.”

“Dis billik,” sê Ron grinnikend.

“Oe, dankie, Harry,” sê Hermien. “Ek sal vir ons programme kry –”

Hul geldsakkies is aansienlik ligter toe hulle na hul tente teruggaan. Bill, Charlie en Ginny spog ook met groen rosette en mnr. Weasley dra ’n Ierse vlag. Fred en George het geen soeweniers nie, want hulle het al hul goud vir Bagman gegee.

Toe weerklink ’n diep, dreunende ghong van iewers anderkant die woud, en groen en rooi lanterns kry skielik lewe in die bome en verlig die pad na die speelveld.

“Dis tyd!” sê mnr. Weasley en hy lyk net so opgewonde soos die res van hulle. “Kom, ons moet gaan!”

CHAPTER EIGHT



THE QUIDDITCH WORLD CUP

Clutching their purchases, Mr. Weasley in the lead, they all hurried into the wood, following the lantern-lit trail. They could hear the sounds of thousands of people moving around them, shouts and laughter, snatches of singing. The atmosphere of feverish excitement was highly infectious; Harry couldn't stop grinning. They walked through the wood for twenty minutes, talking and joking loudly, until at last they emerged on the other side and found themselves in the shadow of a gigantic stadium. Though Harry could see only a fraction of the immense gold walls surrounding the field, he could tell that ten cathedrals would fit comfortably inside it.

"Seats a hundred thousand," said Mr. Weasley, spotting the awestruck look on Harry's face. "Ministry task force of five hundred have been working on it all year. Muggle Repelling Charms on every inch of it. Every time Muggles have got anywhere near here all year, they've suddenly remembered urgent appointments and had to dash

away again . . . bless them,” he added fondly, leading the way toward the nearest entrance, which was already surrounded by a swarm of shouting witches and wizards.

“Prime seats!” said the Ministry witch at the entrance when she checked their tickets. “Top Box! Straight upstairs, Arthur, and as high as you can go.”

The stairs into the stadium were carpeted in rich purple. They clambered upward with the rest of the crowd, which slowly filtered away through doors into the stands to their left and right. Mr. Weasley’s party kept climbing, and at last they reached the top of the staircase and found themselves in a small box, set at the highest point of the stadium and situated exactly halfway between the golden goalposts. About twenty purple-and-gilt chairs stood in two rows here, and Harry, filing into the front seats with the Weasleys, looked down upon a scene the likes of which he could never have imagined.

A hundred thousand witches and wizards were taking their places in the seats, which rose in levels around the long oval field. Everything was suffused with a mysterious golden light, which seemed to come from the stadium itself. The field looked smooth as velvet from their lofty position. At either end of the field stood three goal hoops, fifty feet high; right opposite them, almost at Harry’s eye level, was a gigantic blackboard. Gold writing kept dashing across it as though an invisible giant’s hand were scrawling upon the blackboard and then wiping it off again; watching it, Harry saw that it was flashing advertisements across the field.

The Bluebottle: A Broom for All the Family — Safe, Reliable, and with Built-in Anti-Burglar Buzzer . . . Mrs. Skower’s All-

Purpose Magical Mess Remover: No Pain, No Stain! . . . Gladrags Wizardwear — London, Paris, Hogsmeade . . .

Harry tore his eyes away from the sign and looked over his shoulder to see who else was sharing the box with them. So far it was empty, except for a tiny creature sitting in the second from last seat at the end of the row behind them. The creature, whose legs were so short they stuck out in front of it on the chair, was wearing a tea towel draped like a toga, and it had its face hidden in its hands. Yet those long, batlike ears were oddly familiar. . . .

“Dobby?” said Harry incredulously.

The tiny creature looked up and stretched its fingers, revealing enormous brown eyes and a nose the exact size and shape of a large tomato. It wasn’t Dobby — it was, however, unmistakably a house-elf, as Harry’s friend Dobby had been. Harry had set Dobby free from his old owners, the Malfoy family.

“Did sir just call me Dobby?” squeaked the elf curiously from between its fingers. Its voice was higher even than Dobby’s had been, a teeny, quivering squeak of a voice, and Harry suspected — though it was very hard to tell with a house-elf — that this one might just be female. Ron and Hermione spun around in their seats to look. Though they had heard a lot about Dobby from Harry, they had never actually met him. Even Mr. Weasley looked around in interest.

“Sorry,” Harry told the elf, “I just thought you were someone I knew.”

“But I knows Dobby too, sir!” squeaked the elf. She was shielding her face, as though blinded by light, though the Top Box was not brightly lit. “My name is Winky, sir — and you, sir —” Her dark

brown eyes widened to the size of side plates as they rested upon Harry's scar. "You is surely Harry Potter!"

"Yeah, I am," said Harry.

"But Dobby talks of you all the time, sir!" she said, lowering her hands very slightly and looking awestruck.

"How is he?" said Harry. "How's freedom suiting him?"

"Ah, sir," said Winky, shaking her head, "ah sir, meaning no disrespect, sir, but I is not sure you did Dobby a favor, sir, when you is setting him free."

"Why?" said Harry, taken aback. "What's wrong with him?"

"Freedom is going to Dobby's head, sir," said Winky sadly. "Ideas above his station, sir. Can't get another position, sir."

"Why not?" said Harry.

Winky lowered her voice by a half-octave and whispered, "*He is wanting paying for his work, sir.*"

"Paying?" said Harry blankly. "Well — why shouldn't he be paid?"

Winky looked quite horrified at the idea and closed her fingers slightly so that her face was half-hidden again.

"House-elves is not paid, sir!" she said in a muffled squeak. "No, no, no. I says to Dobby, I says, go find yourself a nice family and settle down, Dobby. He is getting up to all sorts of high jinks, sir, what is unbecoming to a house-elf. You goes racketing around like this, Dobby, I says, and next thing I hear you's up in front of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, like some common goblin."

"Well, it's about time he had a bit of fun," said Harry.

“House-elves is not supposed to have fun, Harry Potter,” said Winky firmly, from behind her hands. “House-elves does what they is told. I is not liking heights at all, Harry Potter” — she glanced toward the edge of the box and gulped — “but my master sends me to the Top Box and I comes, sir.”

“Why’s he sent you up here, if he knows you don’t like heights?” said Harry, frowning.

“Master — master wants me to save him a seat, Harry Potter. He is very busy,” said Winky, tilting her head toward the empty space beside her. “Winky is wishing she is back in master’s tent, Harry Potter, but Winky does what she is told. Winky is a good house-elf.”

She gave the edge of the box another frightened look and hid her eyes completely again. Harry turned back to the others.

“So that’s a house-elf?” Ron muttered. “Weird things, aren’t they?”

“Dobby was weirder,” said Harry fervently.

Ron pulled out his Omnioculars and started testing them, staring down into the crowd on the other side of the stadium.

“Wild!” he said, twiddling the replay knob on the side. “I can make that old bloke down there pick his nose again . . . and again . . . and again . . .”

Hermione, meanwhile, was skimming eagerly through her velvet-covered, tasseled program.

““A display from the team mascots will precede the match,”” she read aloud.

“Oh that’s always worth watching,” said Mr. Weasley. “National teams bring creatures from their native land, you know, to put on a bit of a show.”

The box filled gradually around them over the next half hour. Mr. Weasley kept shaking hands with people who were obviously very important wizards. Percy jumped to his feet so often that he looked as though he were trying to sit on a hedgehog. When Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic himself, arrived, Percy bowed so low that his glasses fell off and shattered. Highly embarrassed, he repaired them with his wand and thereafter remained in his seat, throwing jealous looks at Harry, whom Cornelius Fudge had greeted like an old friend. They had met before, and Fudge shook Harry's hand in a fatherly fashion, asked how he was, and introduced him to the wizards on either side of him.

"Harry Potter, you know," he told the Bulgarian minister loudly, who was wearing splendid robes of black velvet trimmed with gold and didn't seem to understand a word of English. "*Harry Potter* . . . oh come on now, you know who he is . . . the boy who survived You-Know-Who . . . you *do* know who he is —"

The Bulgarian wizard suddenly spotted Harry's scar and started gabbling loudly and excitedly, pointing at it.

"Knew we'd get there in the end," said Fudge wearily to Harry. "I'm no great shakes at languages; I need Barty Crouch for this sort of thing. Ah, I see his house-elf's saving him a seat. . . . Good job too, these Bulgarian blighters have been trying to cadge all the best places . . . ah, and here's Lucius!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned quickly. Edging along the second row to three still-empty seats right behind Mr. Weasley were none other than Dobby the house-elf's former owners: Lucius Malfoy; his son, Draco; and a woman Harry supposed must be Draco's mother.

Harry and Draco Malfoy had been enemies ever since their very first journey to Hogwarts. A pale boy with a pointed face and white-blond hair, Draco greatly resembled his father. His mother was blonde too; tall and slim, she would have been nice-looking if she hadn't been wearing a look that suggested there was a nasty smell under her nose.

"Ah, Fudge," said Mr. Malfoy, holding out his hand as he reached the Minister of Magic. "How are you? I don't think you've met my wife, Narcissa? Or our son, Draco?"

"How do you do, how do you do?" said Fudge, smiling and bowing to Mrs. Malfoy. "And allow me to introduce you to Mr. Oblansk — Obalonsk — Mr. — well, he's the Bulgarian Minister of Magic, and he can't understand a word I'm saying anyway, so never mind. And let's see who else — you know Arthur Weasley, I daresay?"

It was a tense moment. Mr. Weasley and Mr. Malfoy looked at each other and Harry vividly recalled the last time they had come face-to-face: It had been in Flourish and Blotts bookshop, and they had had a fight. Mr. Malfoy's cold gray eyes swept over Mr. Weasley, and then up and down the row.

"Good lord, Arthur," he said softly. "What did you have to sell to get seats in the Top Box? Surely your house wouldn't have fetched this much?"

Fudge, who wasn't listening, said, "Lucius has just given a *very* generous contribution to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, Arthur. He's here as my guest."

"How — how nice," said Mr. Weasley, with a very strained smile.

Mr. Malfoy's eyes had returned to Hermione, who went slightly pink, but stared determinedly back at him. Harry knew exactly what was making Mr. Malfoy's lip curl like that. The Malfoys prided themselves on being purebloods; in other words, they considered anyone of Muggle descent, like Hermione, second-class. However, under the gaze of the Minister of Magic, Mr. Malfoy didn't dare say anything. He nodded sneeringly to Mr. Weasley and continued down the line to his seats. Draco shot Harry, Ron, and Hermione one contemptuous look, then settled himself between his mother and father.

"Slimy gits," Ron muttered as he, Harry, and Hermione turned to face the field again. Next moment, Ludo Bagman charged into the box.

"Everyone ready?" he said, his round face gleaming like a great, excited Edam. "Minister — ready to go?"

"Ready when you are, Ludo," said Fudge comfortably.

Ludo whipped out his wand, directed it at his own throat, and said "*Sonorus!*" and then spoke over the roar of sound that was now filling the packed stadium; his voice echoed over them, booming into every corner of the stands.

"Ladies and gentlemen . . . welcome! Welcome to the final of the four hundred and twenty-second Quidditch World Cup!"

The spectators screamed and clapped. Thousands of flags waved, adding their discordant national anthems to the racket. The huge blackboard opposite them was wiped clear of its last message (*Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans — A Risk with Every Mouthful!*) and now showed **BULGARIA: 0, IRELAND: 0.**

“And now, without further ado, allow me to introduce . . . the Bulgarian National Team Mascots!”

The right-hand side of the stands, which was a solid block of scarlet, roared its approval.

“I wonder what they’ve brought,” said Mr. Weasley, leaning forward in his seat. “Aaah!” He suddenly whipped off his glasses and polished them hurriedly on his robes. “*Veela!*”

“What are veel — ?”

But a hundred veela were now gliding out onto the field, and Harry’s question was answered for him. Veela were women . . . the most beautiful women Harry had ever seen . . . except that they weren’t — they couldn’t be — human. This puzzled Harry for a moment while he tried to guess what exactly they could be; what could make their skin shine moon-bright like that, or their white-gold hair fan out behind them without wind . . . but then the music started, and Harry stopped worrying about them not being human — in fact, he stopped worrying about anything at all.

The veela had started to dance, and Harry’s mind had gone completely and blissfully blank. All that mattered in the world was that he kept watching the veela, because if they stopped dancing, terrible things would happen. . . .

And as the veela danced faster and faster, wild, half-formed thoughts started chasing through Harry’s dazed mind. He wanted to do something very impressive, right now. Jumping from the box into the stadium seemed a good idea . . . but would it be good enough?

“Harry, what *are* you doing?” said Hermione’s voice from a long way off.

The music stopped. Harry blinked. He was standing up, and one of his legs was resting on the wall of the box. Next to him, Ron was frozen in an attitude that looked as though he were about to dive from a springboard.

Angry yells were filling the stadium. The crowd didn't want the veela to go. Harry was with them; he would, of course, be supporting Bulgaria, and he wondered vaguely why he had a large green shamrock pinned to his chest. Ron, meanwhile, was absentmindedly shredding the shamrocks on his hat. Mr. Weasley, smiling slightly, leaned over to Ron and tugged the hat out of his hands.

"You'll be wanting that," he said, "once Ireland have had their say."

"Huh?" said Ron, staring openmouthed at the veela, who had now lined up along one side of the field.

Hermione made a loud tutting noise. She reached up and pulled Harry back into his seat. "*Honestly!*" she said.

"And now," roared Ludo Bagman's voice, "kindly put your wands in the air . . . for the Irish National Team Mascots!"

Next moment, what seemed to be a great green-and-gold comet came zooming into the stadium. It did one circuit of the stadium, then split into two smaller comets, each hurtling toward the goalposts. A rainbow arced suddenly across the field, connecting the two balls of light. The crowd ooohed and aaaaahed, as though at a fireworks display. Now the rainbow faded and the balls of light reunited and merged; they had formed a great shimmering shamrock, which rose up into the sky and began to soar over the stands. Something like golden rain seemed to be falling from it —

“Excellent!” yelled Ron as the shamrock soared over them, and heavy gold coins rained from it, bouncing off their heads and seats. Squinting up at the shamrock, Harry realized that it was actually comprised of thousands of tiny little bearded men with red vests, each carrying a minute lamp of gold or green.

“Leprechauns!” said Mr. Weasley over the tumultuous applause of the crowd, many of whom were still fighting and rummaging around under their chairs to retrieve the gold.

“There you go,” Ron yelled happily, stuffing a fistful of gold coins into Harry’s hand, “for the Omnioculars! Now you’ve got to buy me a Christmas present, ha!”

The great shamrock dissolved, the leprechauns drifted down onto the field on the opposite side from the veela, and settled themselves cross-legged to watch the match.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, kindly welcome — the Bulgarian National Quidditch Team! I give you — Dimitrov!”

A scarlet-clad figure on a broomstick, moving so fast it was blurred, shot out onto the field from an entrance far below, to wild applause from the Bulgarian supporters.

“Ivanova!”

A second scarlet-robed player zoomed out.

“Zograf! Levski! Vulchanov! Volkov! Aaaaaaand — *Krum!*”

“That’s him, that’s him!” yelled Ron, following Krum with his Omnioculars. Harry quickly focused his own.

Viktor Krum was thin, dark, and sallow-skinned, with a large curved nose and thick black eyebrows. He looked like an overgrown bird of prey. It was hard to believe he was only eighteen.

“And now, please greet — the Irish National Quidditch Team!” yelled Bagman. “Presenting — Connolly! Ryan! Troy! Mullet! Moran! Quigley! Aaaaaand — *Lynch!*”

Seven green blurs swept onto the field; Harry spun a small dial on the side of his Omnioculars and slowed the players down enough to read the word “Firebolt” on each of their brooms and see their names, embroidered in silver, upon their backs.

“And here, all the way from Egypt, our referee, acclaimed Chairwizard of the International Association of Quidditch, Hassan Mostafa!”

A small and skinny wizard, completely bald but with a mustache to rival Uncle Vernon’s, wearing robes of pure gold to match the stadium, strode out onto the field. A silver whistle was protruding from under the mustache, and he was carrying a large wooden crate under one arm, his broomstick under the other. Harry spun the speed dial on his Omnioculars back to normal, watching closely as Mostafa mounted his broomstick and kicked the crate open — four balls burst into the air: the scarlet Quaffle, the two black Bludgers, and (Harry saw it for the briefest moment, before it sped out of sight) the minuscule, winged Golden Snitch. With a sharp blast on his whistle, Mostafa shot into the air after the balls.

“Theeeeeeeeey’re OFF!” screamed Bagman. “And it’s Mullet! Troy! Moran! Dimitrov! Back to Mullet! Troy! Levski! Moran!”

It was Quidditch as Harry had never seen it played before. He was pressing his Omnioculars so hard to his glasses that they were cutting into the bridge of his nose. The speed of the players was incredible — the Chasers were throwing the Quaffle to one another so fast that

Bagman only had time to say their names. Harry spun the slow dial on the right of his Omnioculars again, pressed the play-by-play button on the top, and he was immediately watching in slow motion, while glittering purple lettering flashed across the lenses and the noise of the crowd pounded against his eardrums.

Hawkshead Attacking Formation, he read as he watched the three Irish Chasers zoom closely together, Troy in the center, slightly ahead of Mullet and Moran, bearing down upon the Bulgarians. *Porskoff Ploy* flashed up next, as Troy made as though to dart upward with the Quaffle, drawing away the Bulgarian Chaser Ivanova and dropping the Quaffle to Moran. One of the Bulgarian Beaters, Volkov, swung hard at a passing Bludger with his small club, knocking it into Moran's path; Moran ducked to avoid the Bludger and dropped the Quaffle; and Levski, soaring beneath, caught it —

“TROY SCORES!” roared Bagman, and the stadium shuddered with a roar of applause and cheers. “Ten zero to Ireland!”

“What?” Harry yelled, looking wildly around through his Omnioculars. “But Levski's got the Quaffle!”

“Harry, if you're not going to watch at normal speed, you're going to miss things!” shouted Hermione, who was dancing up and down, waving her arms in the air while Troy did a lap of honor around the field. Harry looked quickly over the top of his Omnioculars and saw that the leprechauns watching from the sidelines had all risen into the air again and formed the great, glittering shamrock. Across the field, the veela were watching them sulkily.

Furious with himself, Harry spun his speed dial back to normal as play resumed.

Harry knew enough about Quidditch to see that the Irish Chasers were superb. They worked as a seamless team, their movements so well coordinated that they appeared to be reading one another's minds as they positioned themselves, and the rosette on Harry's chest kept squeaking their names: "*Troy — Mullet — Moran!*" And within ten minutes, Ireland had scored twice more, bringing their lead to thirty-zero and causing a thunderous tide of roars and applause from the green-clad supporters.

The match became still faster, but more brutal. Volkov and Vulchanov, the Bulgarian Beaters, were whacking the Bludgers as fiercely as possible at the Irish Chasers, and were starting to prevent them from using some of their best moves; twice they were forced to scatter, and then, finally, Ivanova managed to break through their ranks; dodge the Keeper, Ryan; and score Bulgaria's first goal.

"Fingers in your ears!" bellowed Mr. Weasley as the veela started to dance in celebration. Harry screwed up his eyes too; he wanted to keep his mind on the game. After a few seconds, he chanced a glance at the field. The veela had stopped dancing, and Bulgaria was again in possession of the Quaffle.

"Dimitrov! Levski! Dimitrov! Ivanova — oh I say!" roared Bagman.

One hundred thousand wizards gasped as the two Seekers, Krum and Lynch, plummeted through the center of the Chasers, so fast that it looked as though they had just jumped from airplanes without parachutes. Harry followed their descent through his Omnioculars, squinting to see where the Snitch was —

"They're going to crash!" screamed Hermione next to Harry.

She was half right — at the very last second, Viktor Krum pulled out of the dive and spiraled off. Lynch, however, hit the ground with a dull thud that could be heard throughout the stadium. A huge groan rose from the Irish seats.

“Fool!” moaned Mr. Weasley. “Krum was feinting!”

“It’s time-out!” yelled Bagman’s voice, “as trained mediwizards hurry onto the field to examine Aidan Lynch!”

“He’ll be okay, he only got ploughed!” Charlie said reassuringly to Ginny, who was hanging over the side of the box, looking horror-struck. “Which is what Krum was after, of course. . . .”

Harry hastily pressed the replay and play-by-play buttons on his Omnioculars, twiddled the speed dial, and put them back up to his eyes.

He watched as Krum and Lynch dived again in slow motion. *Wronski Defensive Feint — dangerous Seeker diversion* read the shining purple lettering across his lenses. He saw Krum’s face contorted with concentration as he pulled out of the dive just in time, while Lynch was flattened, and he understood — Krum hadn’t seen the Snitch at all, he was just making Lynch copy him. Harry had never seen anyone fly like that; Krum hardly looked as though he was using a broomstick at all; he moved so easily through the air that he looked unsupported and weightless. Harry turned his Omnioculars back to normal and focused them on Krum. He was now circling high above Lynch, who was being revived by mediwizards with cups of potion. Harry, focusing still more closely upon Krum’s face, saw his dark eyes darting all over the ground a hundred feet below. He was using the time while Lynch was revived to look for the Snitch without

interference.

Lynch got to his feet at last, to loud cheers from the green-clad supporters, mounted his Firebolt, and kicked back off into the air. His revival seemed to give Ireland new heart. When Mostafa blew his whistle again, the Chasers moved into action with a skill unrivaled by anything Harry had seen so far.

After fifteen more fast and furious minutes, Ireland had pulled ahead by ten more goals. They were now leading by one hundred and thirty points to ten, and the game was starting to get dirtier.

As Mullet shot toward the goalposts yet again, clutching the Quaffle tightly under her arm, the Bulgarian Keeper, Zograf, flew out to meet her. Whatever happened was over so quickly Harry didn't catch it, but a scream of rage from the Irish crowd, and Mostafa's long, shrill whistle blast, told him it had been a foul.

"And Mostafa takes the Bulgarian Keeper to task for clobbering — excessive use of elbows!" Bagman informed the roaring spectators. "And — yes, it's a penalty to Ireland!"

The leprechauns, who had risen angrily into the air like a swarm of glittering hornets when Mullet had been fouled, now darted together to form the words "HA, HA, HA!" The veela on the other side of the field leapt to their feet, tossed their hair angrily, and started to dance again.

As one, the Weasley boys and Harry stuffed their fingers into their ears, but Hermione, who hadn't bothered, was soon tugging on Harry's arm. He turned to look at her, and she pulled his fingers impatiently out of his ears.

"Look at the referee!" she said, giggling.

Harry looked down at the field. Hassan Mostafa had landed right in front of the dancing veela, and was acting very oddly indeed. He was flexing his muscles and smoothing his mustache excitedly.

“Now, we can’t have that!” said Ludo Bagman, though he sounded highly amused. “Somebody slap the referee!”

A mediwizard came tearing across the field, his fingers stuffed into his own ears, and kicked Mostafa hard in the shins. Mostafa seemed to come to himself; Harry, watching through the Omnioculars again, saw that he looked exceptionally embarrassed and had started shouting at the veela, who had stopped dancing and were looking mutinous.

“And unless I’m much mistaken, Mostafa is actually attempting to send off the Bulgarian team mascots!” said Bagman’s voice. “Now *there’s* something we haven’t seen before. . . . Oh, this could turn nasty. . . .”

It did: The Bulgarian Beaters, Volkov and Vulchanov, landed on either side of Mostafa and began arguing furiously with him, gesticulating toward the leprechauns, who had now gleefully formed the words “HEE, HEE, HEE.” Mostafa was not impressed by the Bulgarians’ arguments, however; he was jabbing his finger into the air, clearly telling them to get flying again, and when they refused, he gave two short blasts on his whistle.

“*Two* penalties for Ireland!” shouted Bagman, and the Bulgarian crowd howled with anger. “And Volkov and Vulchanov had better get back on those brooms . . . yes . . . there they go . . . and Troy takes the Quaffle . . .”

Play now reached a level of ferocity beyond anything they had yet

seen. The Beaters on both sides were acting without mercy: Volkov and Vulchanov in particular seemed not to care whether their clubs made contact with Bludger or human as they swung them violently through the air. Dimitrov shot straight at Moran, who had the Quaffle, nearly knocking her off her broom.

“*Foul!*” roared the Irish supporters as one, all standing up in a great wave of green.

“Foul!” echoed Ludo Bagman’s magically magnified voice. “Dimitrov skins Moran — deliberately flying to collide there — and it’s got to be another penalty — yes, there’s the whistle!”

The leprechauns had risen into the air again, and this time, they formed a giant hand, which was making a very rude sign indeed at the veela across the field. At this, the veela lost control. Instead of dancing, they launched themselves across the field and began throwing what seemed to be handfuls of fire at the leprechauns. Watching through his Omnioculars, Harry saw that they didn’t look remotely beautiful now. On the contrary, their faces were elongating into sharp, cruel-beaked bird heads, and long, scaly wings were bursting from their shoulders —

“And *that*, boys,” yelled Mr. Weasley over the tumult of the crowd below, “is why you should never go for looks alone!”

Ministry wizards were flooding onto the field to separate the veela and the leprechauns, but with little success; meanwhile, the pitched battle below was nothing to the one taking place above. Harry turned this way and that, staring through his Omnioculars, as the Quaffle changed hands with the speed of a bullet.

“Levski — Dimitrov — Moran — Troy — Mullet — Ivanova —

Moran again — Moran — MORAN SCORES!”

But the cheers of the Irish supporters were barely heard over the shrieks of the veela, the blasts now issuing from the Ministry members’ wands, and the furious roars of the Bulgarians. The game recommenced immediately; now Levski had the Quaffle, now Dimitrov —

The Irish Beater Quigley swung heavily at a passing Bludger, and hit it as hard as possible toward Krum, who did not duck quickly enough. It hit him full in the face.

There was a deafening groan from the crowd; Krum’s nose looked broken, there was blood everywhere, but Hassan Mostafa didn’t blow his whistle. He had become distracted, and Harry couldn’t blame him; one of the veela had thrown a handful of fire and set his broom tail alight.

Harry wanted someone to realize that Krum was injured; even though he was supporting Ireland, Krum was the most exciting player on the field. Ron obviously felt the same.

“Time-out! Ah, come on, he can’t play like that, look at him —”

“*Look at Lynch!*” Harry yelled.

For the Irish Seeker had suddenly gone into a dive, and Harry was quite sure that this was no Wronski Feint; this was the real thing. . . .

“He’s seen the Snitch!” Harry shouted. “He’s seen it! Look at him go!”

Half the crowd seemed to have realized what was happening; the Irish supporters rose in another great wave of green, screaming their Seeker on . . . but Krum was on his tail. How he could see where he was going, Harry had no idea; there were flecks of blood flying

through the air behind him, but he was drawing level with Lynch now as the pair of them hurtled toward the ground again —

“They’re going to crash!” shrieked Hermione.

“They’re not!” roared Ron.

“Lynch is!” yelled Harry.

And he was right — for the second time, Lynch hit the ground with tremendous force and was immediately stampeded by a horde of angry veela.

“The Snitch, where’s the Snitch?” bellowed Charlie, along the row.

“He’s got it — Krum’s got it — it’s all over!” shouted Harry.

Krum, his red robes shining with blood from his nose, was rising gently into the air, his fist held high, a glint of gold in his hand.

The scoreboard was flashing **BULGARIA: 160, IRELAND: 170** across the crowd, who didn’t seem to have realized what had happened. Then, slowly, as though a great jumbo jet were revving up, the rumbling from the Ireland supporters grew louder and louder and erupted into screams of delight.

“IRELAND WINS!” Bagman shouted, who like the Irish, seemed to be taken aback by the sudden end of the match. “KRUM GETS THE SNITCH — BUT IRELAND WINS — good lord, I don’t think any of us were expecting that!”

“What did he catch the Snitch for?” Ron bellowed, even as he jumped up and down, applauding with his hands over his head. “He ended it when Ireland were a hundred and sixty points ahead, the idiot!”

“He knew they were never going to catch up!” Harry shouted back

over all the noise, also applauding loudly. “The Irish Chasers were too good. . . . He wanted to end it on his terms, that’s all. . . .”

“He was very brave, wasn’t he?” Hermione said, leaning forward to watch Krum land as a swarm of mediwizards blasted a path through the battling leprechauns and veela to get to him. “He looks a terrible mess. . . .”

Harry put his Omnioculars to his eyes again. It was hard to see what was happening below, because leprechauns were zooming delightedly all over the field, but he could just make out Krum, surrounded by mediwizards. He looked surlier than ever and refused to let them mop him up. His team members were around him, shaking their heads and looking dejected; a short way away, the Irish players were dancing gleefully in a shower of gold descending from their mascots. Flags were waving all over the stadium, the Irish national anthem blared from all sides; the veela were shrinking back into their usual, beautiful selves now, though looking dispirited and forlorn.

“Vell, ve fought bravely,” said a gloomy voice behind Harry. He looked around; it was the Bulgarian Minister of Magic.

“You can speak English!” said Fudge, sounding outraged. “And you’ve been letting me mime everything all day!”

“Vell, it vos very funny,” said the Bulgarian minister, shrugging.

“And as the Irish team performs a lap of honor, flanked by their mascots, the Quidditch World Cup itself is brought into the Top Box!” roared Bagman.

Harry’s eyes were suddenly dazzled by a blinding white light, as the Top Box was magically illuminated so that everyone in the stands could see the inside. Squinting toward the entrance, he saw two

panting wizards carrying a vast golden cup into the box, which they handed to Cornelius Fudge, who was still looking very disgruntled that he'd been using sign language all day for nothing.

“Let's have a really loud hand for the gallant losers — Bulgaria!” Bagman shouted.

And up the stairs into the box came the seven defeated Bulgarian players. The crowd below was applauding appreciatively; Harry could see thousands and thousands of Omniocular lenses flashing and winking in their direction.

One by one, the Bulgarians filed between the rows of seats in the box, and Bagman called out the name of each as they shook hands with their own minister and then with Fudge. Krum, who was last in line, looked a real mess. Two black eyes were blooming spectacularly on his bloody face. He was still holding the Snitch. Harry noticed that he seemed much less coordinated on the ground. He was slightly duck-footed and distinctly round-shouldered. But when Krum's name was announced, the whole stadium gave him a resounding, earsplitting roar.

And then came the Irish team. Aidan Lynch was being supported by Moran and Connolly; the second crash seemed to have dazed him and his eyes looked strangely unfocused. But he grinned happily as Troy and Quigley lifted the Cup into the air and the crowd below thundered its approval. Harry's hands were numb with clapping.

At last, when the Irish team had left the box to perform another lap of honor on their brooms (Aidan Lynch on the back of Connolly's, clutching hard around his waist and still grinning in a bemused sort of way), Bagman pointed his wand at his throat and muttered,

“Quietus.”

“They’ll be talking about this one for years,” he said hoarsely, “a really unexpected twist, that. . . . shame it couldn’t have lasted longer. . . . Ah yes. . . . yes, I owe you . . . how much?”

For Fred and George had just scrambled over the backs of their seats and were standing in front of Ludo Bagman with broad grins on their faces, their hands outstretched.

Die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker

Met hul inkopies styf vasgeklem en mnr. Weasley wat die pad aanwys, stap hulle die woud haastig binne en volg die lanternverligte voetpaadjie. Hulle hoor die geluide van duisende mense wat om hulle beweeg, skree, lag en sing. Die atmosfeer van koorsige afwagting is hoogs aansteeklik; Harry kan nie ophou grinnik nie. Vir twintig minute stap hulle deur die woud terwyl hulle luidkeels gesels en grappe maak, tot hulle uiteindelik aan die ander kant uitkom en hulself in die skaduwee van 'n reusestadion bevind. Hoewel Harry net 'n fraksie van die uitgestrekte goue mure om die speelveld kan sien, reken hy dat tien katedrale met gemak daarin sal pas.

“Plek vir 'n honderdduisend,” sê mnr. Weasley toe hy die verbysterde uitdrukking op Harry se gesig sien. “'n Taakmag bestaande uit vyfhonderd lede van die Ministerie het die hele jaar hieraan gewerk. Moggelafweer-towerspreuke oral. Elke keer dat 'n Moggel hierdie jaar iewers in die omtrek was, het hy skielik van 'n dringende afspraak onthou en hom of haar uit die voete gemaak . . . rus hul siele,” sê mnr. Weasley goedig terwyl hy hulle na die naaste ingang lei waar 'n horde skreeuende hekse en towenaars reeds saamdrom.

“Prima sitplekke!” sê die heks van die Ministerie by die ingang toe sy hul kaartjies sien. “Boonste losie! Op met die trappe, Arthur, so hoog as wat jy kan gaan.”

Die trappe wat na die stadion lei, is bedek met donkerpers tapyte. Hulle klim boontoe saam met die res van die skare wat algaande na links en regs deur ingange na die pawiljoen verdwyn. Mnr. Weasley en sy geselskap hou aan klim tot by 'n kleinerige losie op die hoogste deel van die pawiljoen en presies op die halflyn tussen die goue doelpale. Hier staan 'n stuk of twintig goue en pers stoele in twee rye en Harry, wat saam met die Weasleys na die voorste sitplekke stap, kyk af op 'n toneel wat hy hom nooit sou kon voorstel nie.

'n Honderdduisend hekse en towenaars is besig om hul plekke in te neem in ry op ry stoele wat in vlakke om die ovaalvormige speelveld boontoe strek. Alles word verlig deur 'n geheimsinnige goue lig wat lyk asof dit uit die stadion self kom. Die speelveld lyk so glad soos fluweel

van hier bo af. Aan elke end van die veld is drie goue, twintig meter hoë doelhoepels; reg oorkant hulle, amper gelyk met Harry se oogvlak, is 'n reusagtige swartbord. Goue letters beweeg aanhoudend daaroor asof 'n onsigbare reus se hand daarop skryf net om dit weer af te vee; Harry sien dat dit advertensies is wat oor die speelveld geflits word.

Die Bloubottel: 'n besem vir die hele gesin – veilig, betroubaar en met 'n ingeboude anti-inbraakgonser . . . Mev. Schrop se veeldoelige Tower-skoonmaker: weg met vlekke en kolle! . . . Kispak vir Towerdrag – Londen, Parys, Hogsmeade . . .

Harry skeur sy oë van die bord af weg en kyk oor sy skouer om te sien wie die losie met hulle deel. Tot dusver is dit nog leeg, buiten 'n klein kreatuurtjie wat in die tweedelaaste sitplek in die ry agter hulle sit. Die kreatuurtjie, wie se bene so kort is dat hulle reguit vorentoe oor die sitplek steek, het 'n afdroogdoek soos 'n toga om hom en hou sy gesig weggesteek in sy hande. Tog is daardie lang vlermuisore vreemd bekend . . .

“Dobbi?” sê Harry ongelowig.

Die klein kreatuurtjie lig sy kop en loer deur sy vingers sodat 'n paar enorme bruin oë en 'n neus wat presies soos 'n groot tamatie lyk sigbaar word. Dit is nie Dobbi nie – dit is egter baie beslis 'n huiself, net soos Harry se ou vriend Dobbi. Harry het vir Dobbi van sy vorige eienaars, die Malfoy-gesin, bevry.

“Het meneer nou net vir my Dobbi genoem?” piep die elf nuuskierig van tussen sy vingers deur. Die stem is nog hoër as Dobbi s'n, 'n temerige stemmetjie, en dit laat Harry dink – hoewel dit baie moeilik is om dit met huiselwe vas te stel – dat hierdie een vroulik is. Ron en Hermien draai in hul sitplekke om om ook te kan sien. Hoewel hulle baie by Harry oor Dobbi gehoor het, het hulle hom nooit ontmoet nie. Selfs mnr. Weasley kyk belangstellend om.

“Jammer,” sê Harry vir die elf, “ek dag jy is iemand wat ek ken.”

“Ma' ek ken ook vir Dobbi, meneer!” piep die elf. Sy steek haar gesig weg asof sy deur die lig verblind word, hoewel die boonste losie nie helder verlig is nie. “My naam is Knipogies, meneer – en u, meneer –” haar donkerbruin oë word so groot soos kleinbordjies toe hulle op Harry se litteken rus, “is so wraggies Harry Potter!”

“Ja, ek is,” sê Harry.

“Dobbi praat heeltyd van u, meneer!” sê sy. Sy laat sak haar hande so effens en daar is 'n uitdrukking van ontsag op haar gesig.

“Hoe gaan dit met hom?” vra Harry. “Geniet hy sy vryheid?”

“Ag, meneer,” sê Knipogies en skud haar kop, “ek wil nie oneerbiedig klink nie, maar ek dink nie u het Dobbi 'n guns bewys toe u hom vrygelaat het nie.”

“Hoekom?” vra Harry dronkgeslaan. “Wat is verkeerd met hom?”

“Sy vryheid is besig om hom ’n groot kop te gee, meneer,” sê Knipogies bedroef. “Idees bo sy stand, meneer. Kan nie werk kry nie, meneer.”

“Hoekom nie?” vra Harry.

Knipogies se stem sak met ’n halwe oktaaf en sy fluister, “Hy soek betaling vir sy werk, meneer.”

“Betalings?” vra Harry verward. “Wel – hoekom mag hy nie betaal word nie?”

Knipogies lyk uiters geskok by die idee en knyp haar vingers effens toe sodat haar gesig weer half weggesteek is.

“Huiselwe word nie betaal nie, meneer!” piep sy gesmoord. “Nee, nee, nee. Ek sê vir Dobbi, ek sê, gaan soek vir jou gawe mense en bedaar. Hy haal allerhande streke uit, meneer, wat nie betaamlik vir ’n huiselwe is nie. As jy so aangaan, Dobbi, sê ek, dan’s die volgende ding wat ek hoor hoe jy daar voor die Departement vir die Beheer van Magiese Kreature staan net soos ’n gewone tuinkabouter.”

“Wel, dis seker tyd dat hy ’n bietjie pret het,” sê Harry.

“Huiselwe is nie gemaak vir pret nie, Harry Potter,” sê Knipogies beslis van agter haar hande. “Huiselwe doen wat vir hulle gesê word. Ek is bang vir hoogtes, Harry Potter –” sy tuur na die kant van die losie en sluk waar, “– maar as my meester my na die boonste losie stuur, dan kom ek, meneer.”

“Hoekom het hy jou hierheen gestuur as hy weet dat jy bang is vir hoogtes?” vra Harry fronsend.

“Meester – meester wil hê dat ek vir hom plek hou, Harry Potter, hy is baie besig,” sê Knipogies en sy kyk skeef na die leë plek langs haar. “Knipogies wens dat sy liewerster in meester se tent terug is, Harry Potter, maar Knipogies maak soos vir haar gesê word, Knipogies is ’n goeie huiselwe.”

Sy kyk nog ’n keer verskrik na die kant van die losie en knyp haar oë dan heeltemal toe. Harry draai terug na die ander toe.

“Dan is dit nou ’n huiselwe,” mompel Ron. “Eienaardige goed, nè?”

“Dobbi was nog erger,” sê Harry koorsig.

Ron haal sy Omnikyker uit en begin om dit te toets deur na die skare aan die ander kant van die stadion te kyk.

“Jissou!” sê hy terwyl hy die kykweerknoppe aan die kant draai. “Ek kan die ou daar oorkant weer in sy neus laat krap . . . en oor . . . en oor . . . en oor . . .”

Hermien is intussen besig om gretig deur haar program, wat met fluweel oorgetrek en met tassels versier is, te blaai.

“’n Vertoning deur die spanne se gelukbringers sal die wedstryd voorafgaan,” lees sy hardop.

“O, dis altyd die moeite werd om dit te sien,” sê mnr. Weasley. “Na-

sionale spanne bring kreature van hul lande af, weet julle, om vermaak te voorsien.”

Oor die volgende halfuur loop die losie stadigaan vol. Mnr. Weasley skud aanmekaar hand met mense wat duidelik baie belangrike towenaars is. Percy spring so dikwels orent dat dit lyk asof hy op ’n krimpvarkie probeer sit. Toe Cornelius Broddelwerk, die Minister van Towerkuns, arriveer, buig Percy so laag dat sy bril flenters val. Hy is baie verleë, toor dit met sy towerstaf reg en bly hierna eerder sit terwyl hy jaloers toekyk hoe Cornelius Broddelwerk vir Harry soos ’n ou vriend groet. Hulle het al voorheen ontmoet en Broddelwerk skud Harry se hand op vaderlike wyse, en stel hom aan die towenaars aan weerskante van hom voor.

“Harry Potter, julle weet,” sê hy hard vir die Bulgaarse minister wat ’n manjifieke kleed van swart ferweel met goue omboorsels aanhet en lyk asof hy nie ’n woord verstaan van wat vir hom gesê word nie. “*Harry Potter* . . . komaan, jy weet tog wie dit is . . . die seun wat Jy-Weet-Wie se aanslag oorleef het . . . Jy moet weet wie dit is –”

Dan sien die Bulgaarse toenaar skielik Harry se litteken en hy begin luidkeels brabbel terwyl hy opgewonde daarna wys.

“Het geweet ons sal eindag daar kom,” sê Broddelwerk moeg vir Harry. “Ek het nie ’n slag met tale nie, het vir Barty Crouch vir hierdie soort ding nodig. A, ek sien sy huiself hou vir hom plek . . . goeie idee, hierdie Bulgaarse bliksems probeer al die beste plekke inpalm . . . A, daar is Lucius!”

Harry, Ron en Hermien swaai vinnig om. Niemand anders nie as Dobbi die huiself se vorige eienaars – Lucius Malfoy, sy seun Draco en ’n vrou wat Harry reken Draco se ma moet wees – is besig om na drie leë sitplekke in die tweede ry reg agter mnr. Weasley te skuifel.

Harry en Draco Malfoy is aartsvyande van die eerste dag toe hulle saam na Hogwarts gereis het. Draco is ’n bleek seun met ’n skerp gesig en witblonde hare wat baie na sy pa lyk. Sy ma is ook blond. Sy is lank en skraal en sou heeltemal gangbaar gewees het as haar gesig nie gelyk het asof daar iets stinks onder haar neus sit nie.

“A, Broddelwerk,” sê mnr. Malfoy en steek sy hand uit toe hy by die Minister van Towerkuns kom. “Hoe gaan dit? Ek glo nie jy’t al my vrou, Narcissa, ontmoet nie? En ons seun, Draco?”

“Aangenaam, aangenaam,” sê Broddelwerk glimlaggend en buig vir mev. Malfoy. “Laat ek julle voorstel aan mnr. Oblansk – Obalonsk – mnr. – wel, hy’s die Bulgaarse Minister vir Towerkuns en hy kan in elk geval nie ’n woord verstaan van wat ek sê nie, dus maak dit nie eintlik saak nie. Laat ek sien, wie nog – jy ken seker vir Arthur Weasley?”

Dit is ’n gespanne oomblik. Mnr. Weasley en mnr. Malfoy kyk na mekaar en hul vorige ontmoeting staan Harry helder voor die gees, dit was in Sierskrif en Klatt, die boekwinkel, en hulle het baklei. Mnr. Malfoy se koue grys oë speel oor mnr. Weasley en daarna op en af met die ry.

"Grote genade, Arthur," sê hy onderlangs, "wat moes jy alles verkoop om plekke in die boonste losie te kan bekostig? Jy't darem seker nie soveel vir jou huis gekry nie?"

Broddelwerk, wat nie gehoor het nie, sê, "Lucius het so pas 'n ruimskootse bydrae tot die St Mungo's Hospitaal vir Magiese Kwinte en Kwale gemaak, Arthur. Hy is hier as my gas."

"Gaaf – baie gaaf," sê mnr. Weasley met 'n geforseerde glimlag.

Mnr. Malfoy se oë rus nou op Hermien, wat effens pienk word, maar vasgerade na hom staar. Harry weet presies hoekom mnr. Malfoy se lip so krul. Die Malfoys roem hulle daarop dat hulle volbloed is; met ander woorde, hulle beskou iemand soos Hermien wat van Moggelafkoms is, as tweedeklas. Onder die blik van die Minister van Towerkuns kan mnr. Malfoy dit egter nie waag om iets te sê nie. Hy knik smalend vir mnr. Weasley en beweeg dan verder met die ry langs na sy sitplek. Draco kyk minagtend na Harry, Ron en Hermien en gaan sit dan tussen sy ma en pa.

"Slymbolle," brom Ron toe hy, Harry en Hermien weer na die speelveld draai. Die volgende oomblik storm Ludo Bagman die losie binne.

"Almal gereed?" sê hy en sy ronde gesig blink soos 'n groot en opgewonde edammerkaas. "Minister – gereed om te begin?"

"As jy gereed is, Ludo," sê Broddelwerk rustig.

Ludo ruk sy towerstaf uit, rig dit op sy keel en sê "*Sonorus!*" en toe praat hy met gemak bo-oor die gedreun van klank wat die gepakte stadion vul; sy stem weergalm oor hulle en trek tot in elke uithoek van die stadion. "Dames en here . . . welkom! Welkom by die eindstryd van die vierhonderd-twee-en-twintigste Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker!"

Die toeskouers juig en klap hande. Duisende vlae wapper en 'n wan-klank van volksliedere word by die kabaal gevoeg. Die laaste boodskap op die groot swartbord oorkant hulle (*Bertie Bott se Allegeurtjebone – elke happie 'n grappie*) word skoongegee en nou staan daar BULGARYE NUL, IERLAND NUL.

"En hiermee, sonder verdere omhaal . . . die gelukbringers van die Bulgaarse span!"

Die regterkant van die pawiljoen, wat 'n soliede rooi blok is, brul goedkeurend.

"Ek wonder wat hulle gebring het?" sê mnr. Weasley terwyl hy voor-oor in sy sitplek leun. "Aaa!" Hy haal sy bril haastig af en poets die lense gejaag aan sy kleed. "Veela!"

"Wat is Veel-?"

'n Stuk of honderd Veela gly reeds oor die veld en beantwoord Harry se vraag op hierdie manier. Veela is vroue . . . die mooiste vroue wat Harry nog ooit gesien het . . . behalwe dat hulle nie – hulle kan net nie – menslik wees nie. Vir 'n oomblik wonder Harry hieroor en probeer uitwerk presies wat hulle is; wat dit is wat hul velle soos maanskyn laat skit-

ter en hul witgoue hare sonder enige wind om hulle laat wapper . . . maar toe begin die musiek en dit pla Harry nie meer in die minste dat hulle nie mense is nie – om die waarheid te sê, net mooi niks kan hom skeel nie.

Die Veela begin dans en Harry se gedagtes loop heeltemal leeg. Al wat nou hoegenaamd belangrik is, is om die Veela dop te hou, want as hulle sou ophou dans, sal vreeslike dinge gebeur . . .

Toe die Veela al vinniger en vinniger dans, begin wilde, halfgevormde idees deur Harry se bedwelmdede gemoed storm. Hy wil iets indrukwekkends doen, sommer nou. Dit lyk na 'n goeie idee om uit die losie tot in die pawiljoen te spring . . . maar sal dit goed genoeg wees?

“Harry, wat *maak* jy?” sê Hermien se stem van iewers ver weg.

Dan hou die musiek op. Harry knip sy oë. Hy staan regop en een van sy bene rus op die muur om die losie. Langs hom staan Ron gevries in 'n posisie soos een wat op die punt is om van 'n duikplank af te spring.

Woedende krete vul die stadion. Die skare wil nie hê dat die Veela moet gaan nie. Harry is een van hulle; natuurlik sal hy vir Bulgarye ondersteun en hy wonder duiselig hoekom daar 'n groot groen klawerroset teen sy bors vasgespeld is. Ron is ingedagte besig om die klawerblare op sy hoed aan flarde te skeur. Mnr. Weasley glimlag effens, leun oor Ron en haal die hoed uit sy hande.

“Jy sal dit nodig hê,” sê hy, “sodra Ierland hul sê gesê het.”

“Hê?” sê Ron en staar oopmond na die Veela wat nou in 'n ry aan een kant van die veld staan.

Hermien klik haar tong. Sy steek 'n hand uit en druk Harry terug op sy sitplek. “Regtig!” sê sy.

“En nou,” brul Ludo Bagman se stem, “hou asseblief jul towerstawe op . . . vir die gelukbringers van die Ierse Nasionale Span!”

Die volgende oomblik trek iets wat soos 'n groot groen-en-goue komiet lyk die stadion binne. Dit gaan een keer om die veld en verdeel dan in twee kleiner komete wat elk op die doelpale afpyl. 'n Reënboog maak plotseling 'n boog oor die veld en verbind die twee balle lig. Die skare “oe” en “aa” asof dit 'n vuurwerkvertoning is. Nou vervaag die reënboog en die ligballe herenig en smelt saam; hulle vorm 'n groot skitterende klawerbal wat die lug in styg en oor die pawiljoene sweef. Iets wat soos goue reëndruppels lyk, val daaruit –

“Fantasties!” gil Ron toe die klawerbal oor hulle koppe sweef en swaar goue munte van hul koppe en van die sitplekke af bons. Toe Harry skeefweg na die klawerbal kyk, besef hy dat dit uit duisende klein bebaarde mannetjies bestaan, elk met 'n klein goue of groen lampie tussen die tande.

“Ierse aardmannetjies!” sê mnr. Weasley bo-oor die luidrugtige applous van die skare, wat nog met mekaar baklei en onder die sitplekke vroetel om die goud op te tel.

"Hierso," skree Ron uitgelate en prop 'n vuus vol goue munte in Harry se hand. "Vir die Omnikyker! Nou moet jy vir my 'n Kersgeskenk koop, **Wag!**"

Die groot klawerbalk los op en verdwyn, die aardmannetjies draf na die ander kant van die veld oorkant die Veela en gaan sit kruisbeen op die veld om na die wedstryd te kyk.

"En nou, dames en here, verwelkom ons – die Bulgaarse Nasionale Kwiddiekspan! Hier is – Dimitroff!"

'n Rooigeklede figuur op 'n besemstok wat so vinnig beweeg dat dit net 'n dowwe streep is, skiet onder luide applous van die Bulgaarse ondersteuners uit 'n ingang daar ver onder en oor die veld.

"Ivanova!"

'n Tweede speler in rooi storm uit.

"Zograff! Lefski! Vulchanoff! Volkoff! Ennnnnnn – Krum!"

"Dis hy! Dis hy!" gil Ron terwyl hy vir Krum met sy Omnikyker volg; Harry stel syne se fokus gou in.

Viktor Krum is skraal, donker en vaalbleek van kleur met 'n groot haakneus en dik swart wenkbroue. Hy lyk soos 'n yslike roofvoël. Dit is moeilik om te glo dat hy nog net agtien is.

"En nou sê ons welkom aan – die Ierse Nasionale Kwiddiekspan!" gil Bagman. "Hier is Conolly! Ryan! Troy! Mullet! Moran! Quigley! Ennnnnnn – Lynch!"

Sewe groen strepe swiep oor die veld; Harry draai 'n klein wysertjie aan die kant van sy Omnikyker om die spelers se spoed so te verminder dat hy die woord "Vuurslag" op elke besem kan lees en ook hul name wat in silwer op hul rûe geborduur is.

"En hier, al die pad van Egipte, ons skeidsregter, die befaamde Voor-sittowenaar van die Internasionale Kwiddiek-assosiasie, Hassan Mostafa!"

'n Klein, maer towenaar in goue klere om by die stadion te pas, en wat heeltemal bles is, maar met 'n snor wat met oom Vernon s'n kan meeding, stap op die veld. 'n Silwer fluitjie steek onder sy snor uit. Hy dra 'n groot houtkrat onder sy een arm en sy besemstok onder die ander. Harry draai die spoedmeter op sy Omnikyker terug na normaal en kyk aandagtig hoe Mostafa op sy besemstok klim en die krat oopskop – vier balle trek die lug in: die rooi Swelger, die twee swart Mokers en (Harry sien dit net vir 'n vlietende oomblik voor dit uit sig verdwyn) die piepklein, ge-vleuelde Goue Snip. Mostafa blaas skril op sy fluitjie en trek daarna agter die balle aan.

"Ennnnnnnnn WEG is hulle!" skree Bagman. "Dit is Mullet! Troy! Morani! Dimitroff! Terug na Mullet! Troy! Lefski! Moran!"

Dit is Kwiddiek soos Harry dit nog nooit tevore gesien het nie. Hy druk sy Omnikyker so hard teen sy oë dat sy bril in sy neusbrug insny. Die

spoed van die spelers is verbysterend – die Jaers gooi die Swelger so vinnig vir mekaar dat Bagman skaars tyd het om hul name te sê. Harry draai die “stadig”-wiewietjie aan die regterkant van sy Omnikyker weer en druk die “regstreekse kommentaar”-knoppie aan die bokant en onmiddellik sien hy die wedstryd in stadige aksie terwyl glinsterende pers letters oor die lense flits en die lawaai van die skare teen sy oordromme hamer.

“Valkekop-aanvalsformasie,” lees hy en sien hoe die drie Ierse Jaers dig teen mekaar en met Troy in die middel, effens voor Mullet en Moran, op die Bulgare afstorm. “Porskoff-swendel,” word volgende geflits toe Troy maak asof hy met die Swelger opwaarts gaan beweeg, vir Ivanova die Bulgaarse Jaer weglok en die Swelger vir Moran gooi. Een van die Bulgaarse Brekers, Volkov, swaai hard met sy klein kolf na ’n verbygaande Moker en stuur dit op Moran af; Moran moet koes om die Moker te ontwyk en laat die Swelger val; en Lefski wat onder verbyvlieg, kry dit in die hande –

“TROY HET ’N DOEL!” brul Bagman en die stadion bewe met ’n gebrul van applous en toejuiging. “Tien-nul vir Ierland!”

“Wat?” gil Harry en kyk wildweg deur die Omnikyker rond. “Maar Lefski het dan die Swelger!”

“Harry, as jy nie teen die normale spoed gaan kyk nie, gaan jy alles mis!” skree Hermien wat op en af spring en haar arms swaai terwyl Troy ’n ererondte om die veld vlieg. Harry kyk vinnig bo-oor die Omnikyker en sien hoe die aardmannetjies wat op die kantlyn staan en kyk weer opstyg en ’n groot, glinsterende klawerbalk vorm. Aan die oorkant van die speelveld kyk die Veela stuurs toe.

Harry kan homself skop. Hy draai die spoedwiewietjie terug na normaal en die spel gaan voort.

Harry weet genoeg van Kwiddiek om te besef dat die Ierse Jaers uitblinkers is. Hulle werk soos een man saam en dit lyk of hulle mekaar se gedagtes kan lees so goed posisioneer hulle hulself. Die roset op Harry se bors hou aan om hul name uit te skree, “Troy – Mullet – Moran!” Binne tien minute behaal Ierland nog twee doele sodat hulle dertig-nul voorloop, wat tot ’n dawerende geskree en applous onder hul groengeklede ondersteuners lei.

Die wedstryd word nog vinniger en ook brutaler. Volkof en Vulchanov, die Bulgaarse Brekers, slaan die Mokers so hard as wat hulle kan na die Ierse Jaers en begin verhoed dat hulle van hul beste bewegings uitvoer; twee keer is hulle verplig om uitmekaar te spat en toe, uiteindelik, slaag Ivanova daarin om deur hul geledere te breek, die Wagter, Ryan, te ontwyk en Bulgarye se eerste doel te skiet.

“Vingers in jul ore!” gil mnr. Weasley toe die Veela seëvierend begin dans. Harry knyp sy oë styf toe; hy wil op die spel konsentreer. Na ’n paar sekondes waag hy dit om weer na die speelveld te loer. Die Veela het ophou dans en Bulgarye is weer eens in besit van die Swelger.

"Dimitrov! Lefski! Dimitrov! Ivanova – alla wêreld!" brul Bagman.

Eenhonderdduisend hekse en towenaars snak na hul asem toe die twee Soekers, Krum en Lynch, dwarsdeur die Jaers grondwaarts stort, so vinnig dat dit lyk asof hulle so pas sonder valskerms uit 'n vliegtuig gespring het. Harry volg hul duikslag deur sy Omnikyker, en met skrefiesoë soek hy die Snip –

"Hulle gaan bots!" skree Hermien langs Harry.

Sy is amper reg – op die laaste oomblik draai Krum skerp op en spitaal weg. Lynch, daarenteen, tref die grond met 'n dowwe slag wat dwarsdeur die stadion gehoor kan word. 'n Diep gekreun klink vanuit die Ierse suiplekke op.

"Dwaas!" kerm mnr. Weasley. "Krum het jou gefnuik!"

"Dis beseringstyd!" gil Bagman se stem, "en opgeleide medi-towenaars storm op die veld om Aidan Lynch te ondersoek!"

"Hy sal oukei wees, hy't net neergeploeg," sê Charlie troostend vir Ginny wat oor die kant van die losie hang en heeltemal naar lyk, "wat natuurlik is wat Krum wou hê . . ."

Harry druk die "kyk-weer-" en "regstreekse kommentaar-"knoppies inderhaas op sy Omnikyker, voetel met die snelheidswyser en hou dit voor sy oë.

In stadige aksie kyk hy weer hoe Krum en Lynch duik. "*Wronski-fnuikslag – gevaarlike Soeker-skynaanval*" staan in glansende pers letters oor die lense. Hy sien hoe Krum se gesig vertrek van konsentrasie toe hy net betyds uit die duikslag wegbreek terwyl Lynch homself te pletter val, en hy besef wat aangaan – Krum het nie die Snip gesien nie, hy wou bloot dat Lynch hom volg. Harry het niemand nog ooit so sien vlieg nie; dit lyk asof Krum glad nie 'n besemstok gebruik nie; hy beweeg met soveel gemak deur die lug, 'n mens sou sê dat hy gewigloos en sonder enigiets wat hom ondersteun, is. Harry draai sy Omnikyker terug na normaal en fokus op Krum. Hy sirkel hoog bo Lynch, wat nou deur die medi-towenaars met bekiers vol towerdrankies gelawe word. Harry, wat nog nader op Krum se gesig fokus, sien hoe sy donker oë oor die grond, sowat dertig meter onder hom, dartel. Hy is besig om die tyd waarin Lynch gelaaf word, te gebruik om ongesteurd na die Snip te soek.

Lynch kom eindelijk orent onder luide toejuiging van die groengeklede ondersteuners, klim op sy Vuurslag, skop weg en klim die lug in. Dit lyk asof sy herstel Ierland nuwe moed gee. Toe Mostafa weer sy fluitjie blaas, gaan die Jaers oor tot aksie met 'n vernuf wat Harry nog nooit geëwenaar gesien het nie.

Na vyftien vinnige en moordende minute het Ierland nog tien doele behaal. Hulle loop nou voor met eenhonderd-en-dertig punte teen tien en die wedstryd is besig om al vuiler te word.

Toe Mullet weer eens met die Swelger onder haar arm op die doelpale

afpyl, vlieg die Bulgaarse Wagter, Zograf, nader om haar te onderskep. Wat ook al gebeur het, is so vinnig verby dat Harry niks kon uitmaak nie, maar 'n uitroep van woede van die Ierse groep en Mostafa se lang, skril geblaas laat hom besef dat dit vuil spel was.

“En Mostafa berispe die Bulgaarse Wagter vir obstruksie – oormatige gebruik van die elmboël!” lig Bagman die brullende skare in. “En – ja, dis 'n strafdoel vir Ierland!”

Die aardmannetjies, wat soos 'n swerm glinsterende perdebye woedend die lug ingespring het met die vuil spel teen Mullet, dartel nou na mekaar toe en vorm die woorde “HA HA HA!”. Die Veela aan die ander kant van die veld spring orent, skud hul hare ergerlik terug en begin weer dans.

Die Weasley-seuns en Harry druk hul vingers soos een man in hul ore, maar Hermien, wat nie die moeite gedoen het nie, pluk aan Harry se arm. Toe hy na haar kyk, trek sy sy vingers ongeduldig uit sy ore.

“Kyk na die skeidsregter!” giggel sy.

Harry kyk af na die speelveld. Hassan Mostafa het reg voor die dansende Veela grondgevat en tree inderdaad baie eienaardig op. Hy span sy spiere en stryk opgewonde oor sy snor.

“Nee, dit kan ons nie toelaat nie!” sê Ludo Bagman, hoewel hy baie geamuseerd klink. “Sal iemand die skeidsregter asseblief 'n klap gaan gee!”

'n Medi-towenaar storm oor die veld, sy eie vingers in sy ore, en skop vir Mostafa hard op die skeen. Dit lyk asof Mostafa bykom; Harry kyk weer deur sy Omnikyker en sien dat hy besonder verleë lyk en op die Veela skree, wat ophou dans het en rebels lyk.

“Tensy ek my misgis, probeer Mostafa sowaar om die Bulgaarse span se gelukbringers van die veld af te stuur!” sê Bagman se stem. “Nou dit is iets wat ons nog nie tevore gesien het nie . . . o, dit kan lelik word . . .”

Dit word ook: die Bulgaarse Brekers, Volkov en Vulchanov, het aan weerskante van Mostafa geland en stry hom op terwyl hulle na die aardmannetjies wys wat die woorde “GIE GIE GIE” vermakerig vorm. Mostafa is egter nie met die Bulgare se argumente beïndruk nie; hy wys met sy vinger die lug in, klaarblyklik dat die spel moet voortgaan, en toe hulle weier om op te styg, blaas hy twee keer hard op sy fluitjie.

“Twee strafdoele vir Ierland!” skreeu Bagman en die Bulgaarse skare brul van woede. “En Volkov en Vulchanov moet liever gou op hul besems klim . . . ja . . . daar gaan hulle . . . en Troy het die Swelger . . .”

Nou het die spel 'n vlak van verwoedheid bereik soos nog nooit tevore gesien is nie. Die Brekers aan albei kante tree genadeloos op: dit lyk of Volkov en Vulchanov in die besonder nie omgee of hul kolwe Mokers of mense tref nie, hulle word met mening deur die lug geswaai. Dimitrof skiet reguit na Moran wat die Swelger het, en laat haar amper van haar besem afval.

"Vuil spel!" gil die Ierse ondersteuners gelyk en almal staan in 'n groen golf op.

"Vuil spel!" eggo Ludo Bagman se toweragtig versterkte stem. "Dimitrov beduiwel Moran – met opset gevlieg om te bots – en dis nog 'n strafdoel – ja, daar's die fluitjie!"

Die aardmannetjies het weer die lug in gespring en hierdie keer vorm hulle 'n reusehand wat 'n baie onbeskofte teken oor die veld vir die Veela maak. Op hierdie oomblik verloor die Veela beheer. Hulle slinger hulself oor die veld en begin om wat na hande vol vuur lyk na die aardmannetjies te gooi. Harry, wat deur sy Omnikyker kyk, sien dat hulle nou glad nie aantreklik lyk nie. Intendeel, hul gesigte het lank geword sodat hulle soos voëls met wrede, skerp snawels lyk en lang, geskubde vlerke bars uit hul skouers –

"In dit, seuns," gil mnr. Weasley bo-oor die geraas van die skare daar onder hulle, "is hoekom julle jul nooit net deur voorkoms moet laat verlei nie!"

Towenaars van die Ministerie skarrel op die veld om die Veela en die aardmannetjies van mekaar te skei, maar met geringe sukses; intussen is die stryd op die veld niks teen die een daar bo in die lug nie. Harry draai hiernatoe en daarnatoe en staar deur sy Omnikyker terwyl die Swelger teen 'n verbysterende spoed van hande verwissel –

"Lefski – Dimitrov – Moran – Troy – Mullet – Ivanova – weer Moran – Moran – MORAN HET 'N DOEL!"

Die toejuiging van die Ierse ondersteuners is skaars hoorbaar bo die krete van die Veela, die ontploffings wat nou uit die lede van die Ministerie se towerstawwe spat en die woedende gebrul van die Bulgare. Die wedstryd gaan dadelik voort; nou het Lefski die Swelger, dan Dimitrov –

Die Ierse Breker, Quigley, swaai met mening na 'n verbygaande Moker en slaan dit so hard as wat hy kan na Krum, wat nie vinnig genoeg koes nie. Dit tref hom vol in die gesig.

'n Oorverdowende gekreun gaan op vanuit die skare; dit lyk asof Krum se neus gebreek is, daar is oral bloed, maar Hasan Mostafa blaas nie sy fluitjie nie. Sy aandag is afgetrek en Harry kan hom nie kwalik neem nie; 'n lid van die Veela het 'n hand vol vuur na hom gegooi en sy besemstok se stert aan die brand gestee.

Harry wens iemand wil besef dat Krum beseer is; hoewel hy Ierland ondersteun, is Krum die opwindendste speler op die veld. Dis duidelik dat Ron ook so voel.

"Beseringstyd! Ag, komaan, hy kan nie so speel nie, kyk hoe lyk hy –"
"Kyk vir Lynch!" gil Harry.

Die Ierse Soeker duik skielik en Harry is vas oortuig dat dit nie 'n Wronski-fnuikslag is nie; dit is die ware Jakob . . .

“Hy het die Snip gesien!” skreeu Harry. “Hy het dit gesien! Kyk hoe vlieg hy!”

Dit lyk asof die helfte van die skare besef wat aangaan, die Ierse ondersteuners kom orent in ’n groen golf en por hul Soeker aan . . . maar Krum is op sy stert. Hoe hy kan sien waarheen hy vlieg, weet Harry nie; bloeddruppels trek deur die lug agter hom aan, maar hy is reeds langs Lynch en die tweestuks pyl weer eens op die grond af –

“Hulle gaan bots!” kryss Hermien.

“Nee, glad nie!” bulder Ron.

“Lynch gaan neerploeg!” gil Harry.

Hy is reg – vir die tweede keer tref Lynch die grond met ’n geweldige slag en word onmiddellik deur ’n horde woedende Veela omring.

“Die Snip, waar’s die Snip?” bulder Charlie verder in die ry af.

“Hy het dit – Krum het dit – dis oor!” skreeu Harry.

Krum, wie se rooi kleed bevlek is met bloed uit sy neus, styg stadig op, sy vuus hoog in die lug en ’n glimp van goud in sy hand.

Die telbord flits BULGARYE: EENHONDERD-EN-SESTIG, IERLAND: EENHONDERD-EN-SEWENTIG oor ’n skare wat nog nie heeltemal besef wat aangaan nie. Toe, geleidelik, soos ’n yslike Jumbo-vliegtuig wat opwarm, groei ’n gedruis wat al harder en harder word vanuit die Ierse geledere tot vreugdekrete oraloor uitbars.

“IERLAND WEN!” skree Bagman wat, soos die Iere, uit die veld geslaan is deur die skielike einde van die wedstryd. “KRUM VANG DIE SNIP – MAAR IERLAND WEN – liewe vader, ek dink nie een van ons het dit verwag nie!”

“Hoekom het hy die Snip gevang?” skree Ron terwyl hy op en af spring en sy hande bo sy kop klap. “Hy het die wedstryd beëindig toe Ierland ’n honderd-en-sestig punte voor was, die sot!”

“Hy het geweet hulle sal die agterstand nooit kan inhaal nie,” skree Harry terug bo-oor die geraas terwyl hy ook hard hande klap, “die Iere was net te goed . . . hy wou dit op sy voorwaardes laat eindig, dis al . . .”

“Hy was baie dapper, nè?” sê Hermien terwyl sy vooroor leun om te sien hoe Krum land en hoe die swerm medi-towenaars ’n pad deur die bakleiende aardmannetjies en Veela moet oopveg om by hom te kom. “Hy lyk verskriklik . . .”

Harry hou sy Omnikyker weer voor sy oë. Dit is moeilik om te sien wat daar onder aangaan, want die aardmannetjies spring opgewonde oral oor die veld rond, maar hy kan Krum, omring deur medi-towenaars, net-net uitmaak. Hy lyk meer iesegrimmig as ooit en weier om verbind te word. Sy spanmaats, wat kopskuddend om hom staan, lyk terneergedruk; ’n entjie verder dans die Ierse spelers vreugdevol in ’n stortreën van goud wat van hul gelukbringers op hulle uitgesak het. Oral oor die stadion wapper vlae, die Ierse volkslied word van alle kante gehoor; die

Verla, wat terug na hul gewone, beeldskone vorms gekrimp het, lyk ont-
agter en verwese.

"Vhel, ons het dapper gevlieg," sê 'n bedrukte stem agter Harry. Toe hy
omkyk, sien hy dat dit die Bulgaarse Minister van Towerkuns is.

"Jy kan ons taal praat!" sê Broddelwerk en hy klink verontwaardig.
"En die hele dag lank laat jy my alles in mimiek doen!"

"Dit vhas baie snaaks," sê die Bulgaarse Minister skouerophalend.

"En terwyl die Ierse span 'n ererondte vlieg met hul gelukbringers aan
hul sy, word die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker na die boonste losie geneem!"
hul Bagman.

Harry word skielik verblind deur 'n helder wit lig toe die boonste losie
op toweragtige wyse verlig word sodat almal op die pawiljoen binne-in
kan sien. Terwyl hy met geskreefde oë na die ingang staar, sien hy twee
tutase towenaars wat 'n enorme goue beker by die losie indra en aan
Cornelius Broddelwerk oorhandig. Broddelwerk lyk nog steeds omge-
krap omdat hy die hele dag verniet met gebaretaal gesukkel het.

"Kom ons klap lekker hande vir die dapper verloorders – Bulgarye!"
skreeu Bagman.

Op met die trappe na die losie kom die sewe verslane Bulgaarse spe-
lers. Die skare daar onder klap waarderend hande; Harry sien duisende
en duisende Omnikykerlense wat na hulle toe blits.

Die Bulgare stap een vir een tussen die rye sitplekke in die losie deur
terwyl Bagman elke naam uitroep voor hulle hul eie Minister en daarna
vir Broddelwerk handgee. Krum, wat heel laaste in die ry is, lyk werklik
sleg. Twee swart oë gloei brandend in sy bebloede gesig. Hy hou die Snip
nog steeds vas. Harry sien dat hy baie minder gekoördineer op die grond
is. Hy waggel soos 'n eend en sy skouers is rond. Toe Krum se naam egter
aangekondig word, juig die hele stadion hom oorverdwend toe.

Toe kom die Ierse span. Aidan Lynch word deur Moran en Connolly
ondersteun; dit lyk of hy na die tweede val nog duiselig is en sy oë lyk
ongefokus. Hy grinnik egter tevrede toe Troy en Quigley die Beker in die
lug hou en die skare hulle daverend toejuig. Harry se hande is lam ge-
klap.

Uiteindelik, toe die Ierse span die losie verlaat om nog 'n ererondte op
hul besems te vlieg (Aidan Lynch agterop Connolly se besem met sy arms
styf om sy middel en 'n benewelde grinnik op sy gesig), rig Bagman sy
towerstaf op sy keel en mompel, "Quietus."

"Hieroor sal hulle nog jare praat," sê hy hees, "'n werklik onverwagte
wending daardie . . . jammer dit het nie langer geduur nie . . . o, ja . . . ja
. . . ek skuld julle . . . hoeveel?"

Fred en George het pas oor die rugleunings van hul sitplekke geklim
en staan voor Ludo Bagman met bak hande en breë glimlagte op hul ge-
sigte.

CHAPTER NINE



THE DARK MARK

D*on't* tell your mother you've been gambling," Mr. Weasley implored Fred and George as they all made their way slowly down the purple-carpeted stairs.

"Don't worry, Dad," said Fred gleefully, "we've got big plans for this money. We don't want it confiscated."

Mr. Weasley looked for a moment as though he was going to ask what these big plans were, but seemed to decide, upon reflection, that he didn't want to know.

They were soon caught up in the crowds now flooding out of the stadium and back to their campsites. Raucous singing was borne toward them on the night air as they retraced their steps along the lantern-lit path, and leprechauns kept shooting over their heads, cackling and waving their lanterns. When they finally reached the tents, nobody felt like sleeping at all, and given the level of noise

around them, Mr. Weasley agreed that they could all have one last cup of cocoa together before turning in. They were soon arguing enjoyably about the match; Mr. Weasley got drawn into a disagreement about cobbling with Charlie, and it was only when Ginny fell asleep right at the tiny table and spilled hot chocolate all over the floor that Mr. Weasley called a halt to the verbal replays and insisted that everyone go to bed. Hermione and Ginny went into the next tent, and Harry and the rest of the Weasleys changed into pajamas and clambered into their bunks. From the other side of the campsite they could still hear much singing and the odd echoing bang.

“Oh I am glad I’m not on duty,” muttered Mr. Weasley sleepily. “I wouldn’t fancy having to go and tell the Irish they’ve got to stop celebrating.”

Harry, who was on a top bunk above Ron, lay staring up at the canvas ceiling of the tent, watching the glow of an occasional leprechaun lantern flying overhead, and picturing again some of Krum’s more spectacular moves. He was itching to get back on his own Firebolt and try out the Wronski Feint. . . . Somehow Oliver Wood had never managed to convey with all his wriggling diagrams what that move was supposed to look like. . . . Harry saw himself in robes that had his name on the back, and imagined the sensation of hearing a hundred-thousand-strong crowd roar, as Ludo Bagman’s voice echoed throughout the stadium, “I give you . . . *Potter!*”

Harry never knew whether or not he had actually dropped off to sleep — his fantasies of flying like Krum might well have slipped into actual dreams — all he knew was that, quite suddenly, Mr. Weasley was shouting.

“Get up! Ron — Harry — come on now, get up, this is urgent!”

Harry sat up quickly and the top of his head hit canvas.

“‘S’ matter?” he said.

Dimly, he could tell that something was wrong. The noises in the campsite had changed. The singing had stopped. He could hear screams, and the sound of people running. He slipped down from the bunk and reached for his clothes, but Mr. Weasley, who had pulled on his jeans over his own pajamas, said, “No time, Harry — just grab a jacket and get outside — quickly!”

Harry did as he was told and hurried out of the tent, Ron at his heels.

By the light of the few fires that were still burning, he could see people running away into the woods, fleeing something that was moving across the field toward them, something that was emitting odd flashes of light and noises like gunfire. Loud jeering, roars of laughter, and drunken yells were drifting toward them; then came a burst of strong green light, which illuminated the scene.

A crowd of wizards, tightly packed and moving together with wands pointing straight upward, was marching slowly across the field. Harry squinted at them. . . . They didn’t seem to have faces. . . . Then he realized that their heads were hooded and their faces masked. High above them, floating along in midair, four struggling figures were being contorted into grotesque shapes. It was as though the masked wizards on the ground were puppeteers, and the people above them were marionettes operated by invisible strings that rose from the wands into the air. Two of the figures were very small.

More wizards were joining the marching group, laughing and

pointing up at the floating bodies. Tents crumpled and fell as the marching crowd swelled. Once or twice Harry saw one of the marchers blast a tent out of his way with his wand. Several caught fire. The screaming grew louder.

The floating people were suddenly illuminated as they passed over a burning tent and Harry recognized one of them: Mr. Roberts, the campsite manager. The other three looked as though they might be his wife and children. One of the marchers below flipped Mrs. Roberts upside down with his wand; her nightdress fell down to reveal voluminous drawers and she struggled to cover herself up as the crowd below her screeched and hooted with glee.

“That’s sick,” Ron muttered, watching the smallest Muggle child, who had begun to spin like a top, sixty feet above the ground, his head flopping limply from side to side. “That is really sick. . . .”

Hermione and Ginny came hurrying toward them, pulling coats over their nightdresses, with Mr. Weasley right behind them. At the same moment, Bill, Charlie, and Percy emerged from the boys’ tent, fully dressed, with their sleeves rolled up and their wands out.

“We’re going to help the Ministry!” Mr. Weasley shouted over all the noise, rolling up his own sleeves. “You lot — get into the woods, and *stick together*. I’ll come and fetch you when we’ve sorted this out!”

Bill, Charlie, and Percy were already sprinting away toward the oncoming marchers; Mr. Weasley tore after them. Ministry wizards were dashing from every direction toward the source of the trouble. The crowd beneath the Roberts family was coming ever closer.

“C’mon,” said Fred, grabbing Ginny’s hand and starting to pull her

toward the wood. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and George followed. They all looked back as they reached the trees. The crowd beneath the Roberts family was larger than ever; they could see the Ministry wizards trying to get through it to the hooded wizards in the center, but they were having great difficulty. It looked as though they were scared to perform any spell that might make the Roberts family fall.

The colored lanterns that had lit the path to the stadium had been extinguished. Dark figures were blundering through the trees; children were crying; anxious shouts and panicked voices were reverberating around them in the cold night air. Harry felt himself being pushed hither and thither by people whose faces he could not see. Then he heard Ron yell with pain.

“What happened?” said Hermione anxiously, stopping so abruptly that Harry walked into her. “Ron, where are you? Oh this is stupid — *Lumos!*”

She illuminated her wand and directed its narrow beam across the path. Ron was lying sprawled on the ground.

“Tripped over a tree root,” he said angrily, getting to his feet again.

“Well, with feet that size, hard not to,” said a drawling voice from behind them.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned sharply. Draco Malfoy was standing alone nearby, leaning against a tree, looking utterly relaxed. His arms folded, he seemed to have been watching the scene at the campsite through a gap in the trees.

Ron told Malfoy to do something that Harry knew he would never have dared say in front of Mrs. Weasley.

“Language, Weasley,” said Malfoy, his pale eyes glittering. “Hadn’t you better be hurrying along, now? You wouldn’t like *her* spotted, would you?”

He nodded at Hermione, and at the same moment, a blast like a bomb sounded from the campsite, and a flash of green light momentarily lit the trees around them.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said Hermione defiantly.

“Granger, they’re after *Muggles*,” said Malfoy. “D’you want to be showing off your knickers in midair? Because if you do, hang around . . . they’re moving this way, and it would give us all a laugh.”

“Hermione’s a witch,” Harry snarled.

“Have it your own way, Potter,” said Malfoy, grinning maliciously. “If you think they can’t spot a Mudblood, stay where you are.”

“You watch your mouth!” shouted Ron. Everybody present knew that “Mudblood” was a very offensive term for a witch or wizard of Muggle parentage.

“Never mind, Ron,” said Hermione quickly, seizing Ron’s arm to restrain him as he took a step toward Malfoy.

There came a bang from the other side of the trees that was louder than anything they had heard. Several people nearby screamed. Malfoy chuckled softly.

“Scare easily, don’t they?” he said lazily. “I suppose your daddy told you all to hide? What’s he up to — trying to rescue the Muggles?”

“Where’re *your* parents?” said Harry, his temper rising. “Out there wearing masks, are they?”

Malfoy turned his face to Harry, still smiling.

“Well . . . if they were, I wouldn’t be likely to tell you, would I, Potter?”

“Oh come on,” said Hermione, with a disgusted look at Malfoy, “let’s go and find the others.”

“Keep that big bushy head down, Granger,” sneered Malfoy.

“Come *on*,” Hermione repeated, and she pulled Harry and Ron up the path again.

“I’ll bet you anything his dad *is* one of that masked lot!” said Ron hotly.

“Well, with any luck, the Ministry will catch him!” said Hermione fervently. “Oh I can’t believe this. Where have the others got to?”

Fred, George, and Ginny were nowhere to be seen, though the path was packed with plenty of other people, all looking nervously over their shoulders toward the commotion back at the campsite. A huddle of teenagers in pajamas was arguing vociferously a little way along the path. When they saw Harry, Ron, and Hermione, a girl with thick curly hair turned and said quickly, “*Où est Madame Maxime? Nous l’avons perdue —*”

“Er — what?” said Ron.

“Oh . . .” The girl who had spoken turned her back on him, and as they walked on they distinctly heard her say, “Ogwards.”

“Beauxbatons,” muttered Hermione.

“Sorry?” said Harry.

“They must go to Beauxbatons,” said Hermione. “You know . . . Beauxbatons Academy of Magic . . . I read about it in *An Appraisal of Magical Education in Europe*.”

“Oh . . . yeah . . . right,” said Harry.

“Fred and George can’t have gone that far,” said Ron, pulling out his wand, lighting it like Hermione’s, and squinting up the path. Harry dug in the pockets of his jacket for his own wand — but it wasn’t there. The only thing he could find was his Omnioculars.

“Ah, no, I don’t believe it . . . I’ve lost my wand!”

“You’re kidding!”

Ron and Hermione raised their wands high enough to spread the narrow beams of light farther on the ground; Harry looked all around him, but his wand was nowhere to be seen.

“Maybe it’s back in the tent,” said Ron.

“Maybe it fell out of your pocket when we were running?” Hermione suggested anxiously.

“Yeah,” said Harry, “maybe . . .”

He usually kept his wand with him at all times in the Wizarding world, and finding himself without it in the midst of a scene like this made him feel very vulnerable.

A rustling noise nearby made all three of them jump. Winky the house-elf was fighting her way out of a clump of bushes nearby. She was moving in a most peculiar fashion, apparently with great difficulty; it was as though someone invisible were trying to hold her back.

“There is bad wizards about!” she squeaked distractedly as she leaned forward and labored to keep running. “People high — high in the air! Winky is getting out of the way!”

And she disappeared into the trees on the other side of the path, panting and squeaking as she fought the force that was restraining her.

“What’s up with her?” said Ron, looking curiously after Winky.

“Why can’t she run properly?”

“Bet she didn’t ask permission to hide,” said Harry. He was thinking of Dobby: Every time he had tried to do something the Malfoys wouldn’t like, the house-elf had been forced to start beating himself up.

“You know, house-elves get a *very* raw deal!” said Hermione indignantly. “It’s slavery, that’s what it is! That Mr. Crouch made her go up to the top of the stadium, and she was terrified, and he’s got her bewitched so she can’t even run when they start trampling tents! Why doesn’t anyone *do* something about it?”

“Well, the elves are happy, aren’t they?” Ron said. “You heard old Winky back at the match . . . ‘House-elves is not supposed to have fun’ . . . that’s what she likes, being bossed around. . . .”

“It’s people like *you*, Ron,” Hermione began hotly, “who prop up rotten and unjust systems, just because they’re too lazy to —”

Another loud bang echoed from the edge of the wood.

“Let’s just keep moving, shall we?” said Ron, and Harry saw him glance edgily at Hermione. Perhaps there was truth in what Malfoy had said; perhaps Hermione *was* in more danger than they were. They set off again, Harry still searching his pockets, even though he knew his wand wasn’t there.

They followed the dark path deeper into the wood, still keeping an eye out for Fred, George, and Ginny. They passed a group of goblins who were cackling over a sack of gold that they had undoubtedly won betting on the match, and who seemed quite unperturbed by the trouble at the campsite. Farther still along the path, they walked into a patch of silvery light, and when they looked through the trees, they

saw three tall and beautiful veela standing in a clearing, surrounded by a gaggle of young wizards, all of whom were talking very loudly.

“I pull down about a hundred sacks of Galleons a year!” one of them shouted. “I’m a dragon killer for the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures.”

“No, you’re not!” yelled his friend. “You’re a dishwasher at the Leaky Cauldron. . . . but I’m a vampire hunter, I’ve killed about ninety so far —”

A third young wizard, whose pimples were visible even by the dim, silvery light of the veela, now cut in, “I’m about to become the youngest-ever Minister of Magic, I am.”

Harry snorted with laughter. He recognized the pimply wizard: His name was Stan Shunpike, and he was in fact a conductor on the triple-decker Knight Bus. He turned to tell Ron this, but Ron’s face had gone oddly slack, and next second Ron was yelling, “Did I tell you I’ve invented a broomstick that’ll reach Jupiter?”

“*Honestly!*” said Hermione, and she and Harry grabbed Ron firmly by the arms, wheeled him around, and marched him away. By the time the sounds of the veela and their admirers had faded completely, they were in the very heart of the wood. They seemed to be alone now; everything was much quieter.

Harry looked around. “I reckon we can just wait here, you know. We’ll hear anyone coming a mile off.”

The words were hardly out of his mouth, when Ludo Bagman emerged from behind a tree right ahead of them.

Even by the feeble light of the two wands, Harry could see that a great change had come over Bagman. He no longer looked buoyant

and rosy-faced; there was no more spring in his step. He looked very white and strained.

“Who’s that?” he said, blinking down at them, trying to make out their faces. “What are you doing in here, all alone?”

They looked at one another, surprised.

“Well — there’s a sort of riot going on,” said Ron.

Bagman stared at him.

“What?”

“At the campsite . . . some people have got hold of a family of Muggles. . . .”

Bagman swore loudly.

“Damn them!” he said, looking quite distracted, and without another word, he Disapparated with a small *pop*!

“Not exactly on top of things, Mr. Bagman, is he?” said Hermione, frowning.

“He was a great Beater, though,” said Ron, leading the way off the path into a small clearing, and sitting down on a patch of dry grass at the foot of a tree. “The Wimbourne Wasps won the league three times in a row while he was with them.”

He took his small figure of Krum out of his pocket, set it down on the ground, and watched it walk around. Like the real Krum, the model was slightly duck-footed and round-shouldered, much less impressive on his splayed feet than on his broomstick. Harry was listening for noise from the campsite. Everything seemed much quieter; perhaps the riot was over.

“I hope the others are okay,” said Hermione after a while.

“They’ll be fine,” said Ron.

“Imagine if your dad catches Lucius Malfoy,” said Harry, sitting down next to Ron and watching the small figure of Krum slouching over the fallen leaves. “He’s always said he’d like to get something on him.”

“That’d wipe the smirk off old Draco’s face, all right,” said Ron.

“Those poor Muggles, though,” said Hermione nervously. “What if they can’t get them down?”

“They will,” said Ron reassuringly. “They’ll find a way.”

“Mad, though, to do something like that when the whole Ministry of Magic’s out here tonight!” said Hermione. “I mean, how do they expect to get away with it? Do you think they’ve been drinking, or are they just —”

But she broke off abruptly and looked over her shoulder. Harry and Ron looked quickly around too. It sounded as though someone was staggering toward their clearing. They waited, listening to the sounds of the uneven steps behind the dark trees. But the footsteps came to a sudden halt.

“Hello?” called Harry.

There was silence. Harry got to his feet and peered around the tree. It was too dark to see very far, but he could sense somebody standing just beyond the range of his vision.

“Who’s there?” he said.

And then, without warning, the silence was rent by a voice unlike any they had heard in the wood; and it uttered, not a panicked shout, but what sounded like a spell.

“MORSMORDRE!”

And something vast, green, and glittering erupted from the patch of

darkness Harry's eyes had been struggling to penetrate; it flew up over the treetops and into the sky.

“What the — ?” gasped Ron as he sprang to his feet again, staring up at the thing that had appeared.

For a split second, Harry thought it was another leprechaun formation. Then he realized that it was a colossal skull, comprised of what looked like emerald stars, with a serpent protruding from its mouth like a tongue. As they watched, it rose higher and higher, blazing in a haze of greenish smoke, etched against the black sky like a new constellation.

Suddenly, the wood all around them erupted with screams. Harry didn't understand why, but the only possible cause was the sudden appearance of the skull, which had now risen high enough to illuminate the entire wood like some grisly neon sign. He scanned the darkness for the person who had conjured the skull, but he couldn't see anyone.

“Who's there?” he called again.

“Harry, come on, *move!*” Hermione had seized the collar of his jacket and was tugging him backward.

“What's the matter?” Harry said, startled to see her face so white and terrified.

“It's the Dark Mark, Harry!” Hermione moaned, pulling him as hard as she could. “You-Know-Who's sign!”

“*Voldemort's* — ?”

“Harry, come *on!*”

Harry turned — Ron was hurriedly scooping up his miniature Krum — the three of them started across the clearing — but before

they had taken a few hurried steps, a series of popping noises announced the arrival of twenty wizards, appearing from thin air, surrounding them.

Harry whirled around, and in an instant, he registered one fact: Each of these wizards had his wand out, and every wand was pointing right at himself, Ron, and Hermione.

Without pausing to think, he yelled, “DUCK!”

He seized the other two and pulled them down onto the ground.

“*STUPEFY!*” roared twenty voices — there was a blinding series of flashes and Harry felt the hair on his head ripple as though a powerful wind had swept the clearing. Raising his head a fraction of an inch he saw jets of fiery red light flying over them from the wizards’ wands, crossing one another, bouncing off tree trunks, rebounding into the darkness —

“Stop!” yelled a voice he recognized. “STOP! *That’s my son!*”

Harry’s hair stopped blowing about. He raised his head a little higher. The wizard in front of him had lowered his wand. He rolled over and saw Mr. Weasley striding toward them, looking terrified.

“Ron — Harry” — his voice sounded shaky — “Hermione — are you all right?”

“Out of the way, Arthur,” said a cold, curt voice.

It was Mr. Crouch. He and the other Ministry wizards were closing in on them. Harry got to his feet to face them. Mr. Crouch’s face was taut with rage.

“Which of you did it?” he snapped, his sharp eyes darting between them. “Which of you conjured the Dark Mark?”

“We didn’t do that!” said Harry, gesturing up at the skull.

“We didn’t do anything!” said Ron, who was rubbing his elbow and looking indignantly at his father. “What did you want to attack us for?”

“Do not lie, sir!” shouted Mr. Crouch. His wand was still pointing directly at Ron, and his eyes were popping — he looked slightly mad. “You have been discovered at the scene of the crime!”

“Barty,” whispered a witch in a long woolen dressing gown, “they’re kids, Barty, they’d never have been able to —”

“Where did the Mark come from, you three?” said Mr. Weasley quickly.

“Over there,” said Hermione shakily, pointing at the place where they had heard the voice. “There was someone behind the trees . . . they shouted words — an incantation —”

“Oh, stood over there, did they?” said Mr. Crouch, turning his popping eyes on Hermione now, disbelief etched all over his face. “Said an incantation, did they? You seem very well informed about how that Mark is summoned, missy —”

But none of the Ministry wizards apart from Mr. Crouch seemed to think it remotely likely that Harry, Ron, or Hermione had conjured the skull; on the contrary, at Hermione’s words, they had all raised their wands again and were pointing in the direction she had indicated, squinting through the dark trees.

“We’re too late,” said the witch in the woolen dressing gown, shaking her head. “They’ll have Disapparated.”

“I don’t think so,” said a wizard with a scrubby brown beard. It was Amos Diggory, Cedric’s father. “Our Stunners went right through those trees. . . . There’s a good chance we got them. . . .”

“Amos, be careful!” said a few of the wizards warningly as Mr. Diggory squared his shoulders, raised his wand, marched across the clearing, and disappeared into the darkness. Hermione watched him vanish with her hands over her mouth.

A few seconds later, they heard Mr. Diggory shout.

“Yes! We got them! There’s someone here! Unconscious! It’s — but — blimey . . .”

“You’ve got someone?” shouted Mr. Crouch, sounding highly disbelieving. “Who? Who is it?”

They heard snapping twigs, the rustling of leaves, and then crunching footsteps as Mr. Diggory reemerged from behind the trees. He was carrying a tiny, limp figure in his arms. Harry recognized the tea towel at once. It was Winky.

Mr. Crouch did not move or speak as Mr. Diggory deposited his elf on the ground at his feet. The other Ministry wizards were all staring at Mr. Crouch. For a few seconds Crouch remained transfixed, his eyes blazing in his white face as he stared down at Winky. Then he appeared to come to life again.

“This — cannot — be,” he said jerkily. “No —”

He moved quickly around Mr. Diggory and strode off toward the place where he had found Winky.

“No point, Mr. Crouch,” Mr. Diggory called after him. “There’s no one else there.”

But Mr. Crouch did not seem prepared to take his word for it. They could hear him moving around and the rustling of leaves as he pushed the bushes aside, searching.

“Bit embarrassing,” Mr. Diggory said grimly, looking down at

Winky's unconscious form. "Barty Crouch's house-elf . . . I mean to say . . ."

"Come off it, Amos," said Mr. Weasley quietly, "you don't seriously think it was the elf? The Dark Mark's a wizard's sign. It requires a wand."

"Yeah," said Mr. Diggory, "and she *had* a wand."

"*What?*" said Mr. Weasley.

"Here, look." Mr. Diggory held up a wand and showed it to Mr. Weasley. "Had it in her hand. So that's clause three of the Code of Wand Use broken, for a start. *No non-human creature is permitted to carry or use a wand.*"

Just then there was another *pop*, and Ludo Bagman Apparated right next to Mr. Weasley. Looking breathless and disorientated, he spun on the spot, goggling upward at the emerald-green skull.

"The Dark Mark!" he panted, almost trampling Winky as he turned inquiringly to his colleagues. "Who did it? Did you get them? Barty! What's going on?"

Mr. Crouch had returned empty-handed. His face was still ghostly white, and his hands and his toothbrush mustache were both twitching.

"Where have you been, Barty?" said Bagman. "Why weren't you at the match? Your elf was saving you a seat too — gulping gargoyles!" Bagman had just noticed Winky lying at his feet. "What happened to *her*?"

"I have been busy, Ludo," said Mr. Crouch, still talking in the same jerky fashion, barely moving his lips. "And my elf has been Stunned."

"Stunned? By you lot, you mean? But why — ?"

Comprehension dawned suddenly on Bagman's round, shiny face; he looked up at the skull, down at Winky, and then at Mr. Crouch.

"No!" he said. "Winky? Conjure the Dark Mark? She wouldn't know how! She'd need a wand, for a start!"

"And she had one," said Mr. Diggory. "I found her holding one, Ludo. If it's all right with you, Mr. Crouch, I think we should hear what she's got to say for herself."

Crouch gave no sign that he had heard Mr. Diggory, but Mr. Diggory seemed to take his silence for assent. He raised his own wand, pointed it at Winky, and said, "*Rennervate!*"

Winky stirred feebly. Her great brown eyes opened and she blinked several times in a bemused sort of way. Watched by the silent wizards, she raised herself shakily into a sitting position. She caught sight of Mr. Diggory's feet, and slowly, tremulously, raised her eyes to stare up into his face; then, more slowly still, she looked up into the sky. Harry could see the floating skull reflected twice in her enormous, glassy eyes. She gave a gasp, looked wildly around the crowded clearing, and burst into terrified sobs.

"Elf!" said Mr. Diggory sternly. "Do you know who I am? I'm a member of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures!"

Winky began to rock backward and forward on the ground, her breath coming in sharp bursts. Harry was reminded forcibly of Dobby in his moments of terrified disobedience.

"As you see, elf, the Dark Mark was conjured here a short while ago," said Mr. Diggory. "And you were discovered moments later, right beneath it! An explanation, if you please!"

“I — I — I is not doing it, sir!” Winky gasped. “I is not knowing how, sir!”

“You were found with a wand in your hand!” barked Mr. Diggory, brandishing it in front of her. And as the wand caught the green light that was filling the clearing from the skull above, Harry recognized it.

“Hey — that’s mine!” he said.

Everyone in the clearing looked at him.

“Excuse me?” said Mr. Diggory, incredulously.

“That’s my wand!” said Harry. “I dropped it!”

“You dropped it?” repeated Mr. Diggory in disbelief. “Is this a confession? You threw it aside after you conjured the Mark?”

“Amos, think who you’re talking to!” said Mr. Weasley, very angrily. “Is *Harry Potter* likely to conjure the Dark Mark?”

“Er — of course not,” mumbled Mr. Diggory. “Sorry . . . carried away . . .”

“I didn’t drop it there, anyway,” said Harry, jerking his thumb toward the trees beneath the skull. “I missed it right after we got into the wood.”

“So,” said Mr. Diggory, his eyes hardening as he turned to look at Winky again, cowering at his feet. “You found this wand, eh, elf? And you picked it up and thought you’d have some fun with it, did you?”

“I is not doing magic with it, sir!” squealed Winky, tears streaming down the sides of her squashed and bulbous nose. “I is . . . I is . . . I is just picking it up, sir! I is not making the Dark Mark, sir, I is not knowing how!”

“It wasn’t her!” said Hermione. She looked very nervous, speaking

up in front of all these Ministry wizards, yet determined all the same. “Winky’s got a squeaky little voice, and the voice we heard doing the incantation was much deeper!” She looked around at Harry and Ron, appealing for their support. “It didn’t sound anything like Winky, did it?”

“No,” said Harry, shaking his head. “It definitely didn’t sound like an elf.”

“Yeah, it was a human voice,” said Ron.

“Well, we’ll soon see,” growled Mr. Diggory, looking unimpressed. “There’s a simple way of discovering the last spell a wand performed, elf, did you know that?”

Winky trembled and shook her head frantically, her ears flapping, as Mr. Diggory raised his own wand again and placed it tip to tip with Harry’s.

“*Prior Incantato!*” roared Mr. Diggory.

Harry heard Hermione gasp, horrified, as a gigantic serpent-tongued skull erupted from the point where the two wands met, but it was a mere shadow of the green skull high above them; it looked as though it were made of thick gray smoke: the ghost of a spell.

“*Deletrius!*” Mr. Diggory shouted, and the smoky skull vanished in a wisp of smoke.

“So,” said Mr. Diggory with a kind of savage triumph, looking down upon Winky, who was still shaking convulsively.

“I is not doing it!” she squealed, her eyes rolling in terror. “I is not, I is not, I is not knowing how! I is a good elf, I isn’t using wands, I isn’t knowing how!”

“*You’ve been caught red-handed, elf!*” Mr. Diggory roared.

“Caught with the guilty wand in your hand!”

“Amos,” said Mr. Weasley loudly, “think about it . . . precious few wizards know how to do that spell. . . . Where would she have learned it?”

“Perhaps Amos is suggesting,” said Mr. Crouch, cold anger in every syllable, “that I routinely teach my servants to conjure the Dark Mark?”

There was a deeply unpleasant silence. Amos Diggory looked horrified. “Mr. Crouch . . . not . . . not at all . . .”

“You have now come very close to accusing the two people in this clearing who are *least* likely to conjure that Mark!” barked Mr. Crouch. “Harry Potter — and myself! I suppose you are familiar with the boy’s story, Amos?”

“Of course — everyone knows —” muttered Mr. Diggory, looking highly discomfited.

“And I trust you remember the many proofs I have given, over a long career, that I despise and detest the Dark Arts and those who practice them?” Mr. Crouch shouted, his eyes bulging again.

“Mr. Crouch, I — I never suggested you had anything to do with it!” Amos Diggory muttered again, now reddening behind his scrubby brown beard.

“If you accuse my elf, you accuse me, Diggory!” shouted Mr. Crouch. “Where else would she have learned to conjure it?”

“She — she might’ve picked it up anywhere —”

“Precisely, Amos,” said Mr. Weasley. “*She might have picked it up anywhere.* . . . Winky?” he said kindly, turning to the elf, but she flinched as though he too was shouting at her. “Where exactly did you

find Harry's wand?"

Winky was twisting the hem of her tea towel so violently that it was fraying beneath her fingers.

"I — I is finding it . . . finding it there, sir. . . ." she whispered, "there . . . in the trees, sir. . . ."

"You see, Amos?" said Mr. Weasley. "Whoever conjured the Mark could have Disapparated right after they'd done it, leaving Harry's wand behind. A clever thing to do, not using their own wand, which could have betrayed them. And Winky here had the misfortune to come across the wand moments later and pick it up."

"But then, she'd have been only a few feet away from the real culprit!" said Mr. Diggory impatiently. "Elf? Did you see anyone?"

Winky began to tremble worse than ever. Her giant eyes flickered from Mr. Diggory, to Ludo Bagman, and onto Mr. Crouch. Then she gulped and said, "I is seeing no one, sir . . . no one . . ."

"Amos," said Mr. Crouch curtly, "I am fully aware that, in the ordinary course of events, you would want to take Winky into your department for questioning. I ask you, however, to allow me to deal with her."

Mr. Diggory looked as though he didn't think much of this suggestion at all, but it was clear to Harry that Mr. Crouch was such an important member of the Ministry that he did not dare refuse him.

"You may rest assured that she will be punished," Mr. Crouch added coldly.

"M-m-master . . ." Winky stammered, looking up at Mr. Crouch, her eyes brimming with tears. "M-m-master, p-p-please . . ."

Mr. Crouch stared back, his face somehow sharpened, each line

upon it more deeply etched. There was no pity in his gaze.

“Winky has behaved tonight in a manner I would not have believed possible,” he said slowly. “I told her to remain in the tent. I told her to stay there while I went to sort out the trouble. And I find that she disobeyed me. *This means clothes.*”

“No!” shrieked Winky, prostrating herself at Mr. Crouch’s feet. “No, master! Not clothes, not clothes!”

Harry knew that the only way to turn a house-elf free was to present it with proper garments. It was pitiful to see the way Winky clutched at her tea towel as she sobbed over Mr. Crouch’s feet.

“But she was frightened!” Hermione burst out angrily, glaring at Mr. Crouch. “Your elf’s scared of heights, and those wizards in masks were levitating people! You can’t blame her for wanting to get out of their way!”

Mr. Crouch took a step backward, freeing himself from contact with the elf, whom he was surveying as though she were something filthy and rotten that was contaminating his over-shined shoes.

“I have no use for a house-elf who disobeys me,” he said coldly, looking over at Hermione. “I have no use for a servant who forgets what is due to her master, and to her master’s reputation.”

Winky was crying so hard that her sobs echoed around the clearing. There was a very nasty silence, which was ended by Mr. Weasley, who said quietly, “Well, I think I’ll take my lot back to the tent, if nobody’s got any objections. Amos, that wand’s told us all it can — if Harry could have it back, please —”

Mr. Diggory handed Harry his wand and Harry pocketed it.

“Come on, you three,” Mr. Weasley said quietly. But Hermione

didn't seem to want to move; her eyes were still upon the sobbing elf. "Hermione!" Mr. Weasley said, more urgently. She turned and followed Harry and Ron out of the clearing and off through the trees.

"What's going to happen to Winky?" said Hermione, the moment they had left the clearing.

"I don't know," said Mr. Weasley.

"The way they were treating her!" said Hermione furiously. "Mr. Diggory, calling her 'elf' all the time . . . and Mr. Crouch! He knows she didn't do it and he's still going to sack her! He didn't care how frightened she'd been, or how upset she was — it was like she wasn't even human!"

"Well, she's not," said Ron.

Hermione rounded on him.

"That doesn't mean she hasn't got feelings, Ron. It's disgusting the way —"

"Hermione, I agree with you," said Mr. Weasley quickly, beckoning her on, "but now is not the time to discuss elf rights. I want to get back to the tent as fast as we can. What happened to the others?"

"We lost them in the dark," said Ron. "Dad, why was everyone so uptight about that skull thing?"

"I'll explain everything back at the tent," said Mr. Weasley tensely.

But when they reached the edge of the wood, their progress was impeded. A large crowd of frightened-looking witches and wizards was congregated there, and when they saw Mr. Weasley coming toward them, many of them surged forward.

"What's going on in there?"

“Who conjured it?”

“Arthur — it’s not — *Him*?”

“Of course it’s not Him,” said Mr. Weasley impatiently. “We don’t know who it was; it looks like they Disapparated. Now excuse me, please, I want to get to bed.”

He led Harry, Ron, and Hermione through the crowd and back into the campsite. All was quiet now; there was no sign of the masked wizards, though several ruined tents were still smoking.

Charlie’s head was poking out of the boys’ tent.

“Dad, what’s going on?” he called through the dark. “Fred, George, and Ginny got back okay, but the others —”

“I’ve got them here,” said Mr. Weasley, bending down and entering the tent. Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered after him.

Bill was sitting at the small kitchen table, holding a bedsheet to his arm, which was bleeding profusely. Charlie had a large rip in his shirt, and Percy was sporting a bloody nose. Fred, George, and Ginny looked unhurt, though shaken.

“Did you get them, Dad?” said Bill sharply. “The person who conjured the Mark?”

“No,” said Mr. Weasley. “We found Barty Crouch’s elf holding Harry’s wand, but we’re none the wiser about who actually conjured the Mark.”

“*What?*” said Bill, Charlie, and Percy together.

“Harry’s wand?” said Fred.

“*Mr. Crouch’s elf?*” said Percy, sounding thunderstruck.

With some assistance from Harry, Ron, and Hermione, Mr. Weasley explained what had happened in the woods. When they had

finished their story, Percy swelled indignantly.

“Well, Mr. Crouch is quite right to get rid of an elf like that!” he said. “Running away when he’d expressly told her not to . . . embarrassing him in front of the whole Ministry . . . how would that have looked, if she’d been brought up in front of the Department for the Regulation and Control —”

“She didn’t do anything — she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time!” Hermione snapped at Percy, who looked very taken aback. Hermione had always got on fairly well with Percy — better, indeed, than any of the others.

“Hermione, a wizard in Mr. Crouch’s position can’t afford a house-elf who’s going to run amok with a wand!” said Percy pompously, recovering himself.

“She didn’t run amok!” shouted Hermione. “She just picked it up off the ground!”

“Look, can someone just explain what that skull thing was?” said Ron impatiently. “It wasn’t hurting anyone. . . . Why’s it such a big deal?”

“I told you, it’s You-Know-Who’s symbol, Ron,” said Hermione, before anyone else could answer. “I read about it in *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts*.”

“And it hasn’t been seen for thirteen years,” said Mr. Weasley quietly. “Of course people panicked . . . it was almost like seeing You-Know-Who back again.”

“I don’t get it,” said Ron, frowning. “I mean . . . it’s still only a shape in the sky. . . .”

“Ron, You-Know-Who and his followers sent the Dark Mark into

the air whenever they killed,” said Mr. Weasley. “The terror it inspired . . . you have no idea, you’re too young. Just picture coming home and finding the Dark Mark hovering over your house, and knowing what you’re about to find inside. . . .” Mr. Weasley winced. “Everyone’s worst fear . . . the very worst . . .”

There was silence for a moment. Then Bill, removing the sheet from his arm to check on his cut, said, “Well, it didn’t help us tonight, whoever conjured it. It scared the Death Eaters away the moment they saw it. They all Disapparated before we’d got near enough to unmask any of them. We caught the Robertses before they hit the ground, though. They’re having their memories modified right now.”

“Death Eaters?” said Harry. “What are Death Eaters?”

“It’s what You-Know-Who’s supporters called themselves,” said Bill. “I think we saw what’s left of them tonight — the ones who managed to keep themselves out of Azkaban, anyway.”

“We can’t prove it was them, Bill,” said Mr. Weasley. “Though it probably was,” he added hopelessly.

“Yeah, I bet it was!” said Ron suddenly. “Dad, we met Draco Malfoy in the woods, and he as good as told us his dad was one of those nutters in masks! And we all know the Malfoys were right in with You-Know-Who!”

“But what were Voldemort’s supporters —” Harry began. Everybody flinched — like most of the Wizarding world, the Weasleys always avoided saying Voldemort’s name. “Sorry,” said Harry quickly. “What were You-Know-Who’s supporters up to, levitating Muggles? I mean, what was the point?”

“The point?” said Mr. Weasley with a hollow laugh. “Harry, that’s

their idea of fun. Half the Muggle killings back when You-Know-Who was in power were done for fun. I suppose they had a few drinks tonight and couldn't resist reminding us all that lots of them are still at large. A nice little reunion for them," he finished disgustedly.

"But if they *were* the Death Eaters, why did they Disapparate when they saw the Dark Mark?" said Ron. "They'd have been pleased to see it, wouldn't they?"

"Use your brains, Ron," said Bill. "If they really were Death Eaters, they worked very hard to keep out of Azkaban when You-Know-Who lost power, and told all sorts of lies about him forcing them to kill and torture people. I bet they'd be even more frightened than the rest of us to see him come back. They denied they'd ever been involved with him when he lost his powers, and went back to their daily lives. . . . I don't reckon he'd be over-pleased with them, do you?"

"So . . . whoever conjured the Dark Mark . . ." said Hermione slowly, "were they doing it to show support for the Death Eaters, or to scare them away?"

"Your guess is as good as ours, Hermione," said Mr. Weasley. "But I'll tell you this . . . it was only the Death Eaters who ever knew how to conjure it. I'd be very surprised if the person who did it hadn't been a Death Eater once, even if they're not now. . . . Listen, it's very late, and if your mother hears what's happened she'll be worried sick. We'll get a few more hours sleep and then try and get an early Portkey out of here."

Harry got back into his bunk with his head buzzing. He knew he

ought to feel exhausted: It was nearly three in the morning, but he felt wide-awake — wide-awake, and worried.

Three days ago — it felt like much longer, but it had only been three days — he had awoken with his scar burning. And tonight, for the first time in thirteen years, Lord Voldemort's mark had appeared in the sky. What did these things mean?

He thought of the letter he had written to Sirius before leaving Privet Drive. Would Sirius have gotten it yet? When would he reply? Harry lay looking up at the canvas, but no flying fantasies came to him now to ease him to sleep, and it was a long time after Charlie's snores filled the tent that Harry finally dozed off.

Die Donker Merk

“Moet tog net nie vir jul ma sê dat julle gedobbel het nie,” smee k mnr. Weasley vir Fred en George toe hulle almal stadig oor die pers tapyte met die trappe ondertoe beweeg.

“Moet Pa nie bekommer nie,” sê Fred vrolik, “ons het groot planne met hierdie geld, ons wil dit nie gekonfiskeer hê nie.”

Vir ’n oomblik lyk dit asof mnr. Weasley gaan vra wat hierdie groot planne is, maar dis gou duidelik dat hy by nadere oorweging besluit dat hy liever nie wil weet nie.

Hulle word spoedig meegesleur deur die massa toeskouers wat uit die stadion terug na hul kampeerplekke stroom. ’n Hees gesing kom oor die naglug waar hulle op hul spore langs die lanternverligte paadjie terugstap, terwyl kekkelende aardmannetjies met swaaiende lanterns aanhoudend oor hul koppe spring. Toe hulle uiteindelik by hul tente kom, is niemand lus om te gaan slaap nie. En gesien die lawaai om hulle, stem mnr. Weasley toe dat hulle almal ’n laaste beker kakao saam kan drink voor hulle bed toe gaan. Spoedig argumenteer hulle vrolik oor die wedstryd; mnr. Weasley word deur Charlie by ’n stryery oor obstruksie betrek en dit is eers toe Ginny by die klein tafeltjie aan die slaap raak en warm kakao op die vloer mors dat mnr. Weasley ’n einde aan die woordewisselings maak en daarop aandrang dat almal bed toe gaan. Hermien en Ginny gaan na die tent langsaan en Harry en die res van die Weasleys trek hul nagklere aan en klouter op hul slaapbanke. Van die ander kant van die kampeerterrein kan hulle nog steeds ’n gesing hoor en af en toe ’n daverende ontploffing.

“Sjoe, maar ek is bly dat ek nie op diens is nie,” brom mnr. Weasley slaperig, “ek sal nie graag vir daardie Iere wil gaan sê om op te hou feesvier nie.”

Harry, wat op die slaapbank bo Ron lê, staar na die tent se seildak waar hy elke nou en dan ’n glinstering sien wanneer ’n aardmannetjie met ’n lantern oorvlieg. Hy dink weer aan party van Krum se skouspelagtigste bewegings. Hy brand om terug by sy Vuurslag te wees sodat hy die Wronski-fnuikslag kan probeer . . . om die een of ander rede kon Oliver Wood nog nooit daarin slaag om met sy wriemelende diagramme te wys hoe die

beweging nou eintlik lyk nie . . . Harry sien homself in 'n kleed met sy naam op die rug en verbeel hom die sensasie as 'n skare van eenhonderdduisend toeskouers daverend juig wanneer Ludo Bagman se stem deur die stadion weergalm, "Hier is . . . *Potter!*"

Harry sal nooit weet of hy in der waarheid weggedommel het of nie – heel moontlik het sy verbeeldingsvlug van hoe hy soos Krum vlieg in ware drome verander – wat hy wel weet, is dat mnr. Weasley skielik vir hulle skree:

"Word wakker! Ron – Harry – komaan, opstaan, dis dringend!"

Harry kom orent en sy kop tref die seil.

"Wa-wat gaan aan?" vra hy.

Hy kan vaagweg aanvoel dat iets verkeerd is. Die geluide in die kampeerterrein het verander. Die singery het opgehou. Hy hoor 'n geskree en die geluid van mense wat hardloop.

Hy glip van die slaapbank af en steek sy hand uit na sy klere, maar mnr. Weasley, wat sy jeans bo-oor sy nagklere aanhet, sê, "Nie tyd nie, Harry – gryp net 'n baadjie en kom uit – gou!"

Harry gehoorsaam en haas hom uit die tent met Ron op sy hakke.

In die lig van die enkele vure wat nog brand, sien hy hoe mense na die woud hardloop asof hulle op vlug is vir iets wat oor die veld na hulle toe aankom, iets wat vreemde ligflitse en geluide soos geweerskote maak. 'n Harde gejl, wilde lagbuie en dronk gille kom aangedryf; dan vlam 'n skerp groen lig op en verlig die toneel.

'n Groep towenaars loop dig opmekaar en met towerstawwe wat regop die lug in wys stadig oor die veld. Harry staar stip na hulle . . . dit lyk asof hulle nie gesigte het nie . . . dan besef hy dat hul koppe kappe oor het en dat hul gesigte agter maskers versteek is. Hoog bo hulle in die lug sweef vier worstelende figure wie se liggame in groteske vorms verwring is. Dis asof die gemaskerde towenaars op die grond poppemeesters is en die mense bo hulle marionette wat beheer word deur onsibbare draadjies wat van die towerstawwe die lug in strek. Twee van die figure is baie klein.

Nog meer towenaars sluit by die marsjerende groep aan. Hulle lag en beduie na die swewende liggame. Tente vou op en val soos die marsjerende skare groter word. 'n Paar keer sien Harry hoe een van die marsjeerders 'n tent met sy towerstaf uit sy pad blaas. Verskeie tente slaan aan die brand. Die geskree raak al harder.

Die swewende mense word skielik helder verlig toe hulle oor 'n brandende tent beweeg en Harry herken een van hulle – mnr. Roberts, die kampopsigter. Die ander drie lyk asof hulle sy vrou en kinders kan wees. Een van die marsjeerders kantel mev. Roberts met sy towerstaf onderstebo; haar nagrok val oor haar kop en ontbloom 'n enorme valletjiesbroek; sy sukkel om haarself toe te kry terwyl die mense onder haar skreeu van die lag.

“Dis siek,” mompel Ron toe hy sien hoe die kleinste Moggelkind twintig meter bo die grond soos ’n tol begin draai sodat sy kop slap heen en weer slinger. “Dit is regtig siek . . .”

Hermien en Ginny sukkel nog om hul jasse oor hul nagklere aan te trek en kom haastig na hulle toe aangedraf met mnr. Weasley agterna. Terselfdertyd kom Bill, Charlie en Percy uit die seuns se tent. Hulle is klaar aangetrek, hul moue opgerol en hul towerstawwe gereed vir aksie.

“Ons gaan die Ministerie bystaan,” skree mnr. Weasley bo-oor die bo-haai terwyl hy sy eie moue ook oprol. “Julle spul – gaan na die woud en bly bymekaar. Ek sal julle kom haal sodra alles uitgesorteer is!”

Bill, Charlie en Percy nael reeds na die aankomende marsjeerders met mnr. Weasley agterna. Townaars van die Ministerie skiet uit alle rigtings na die bron van die moeilikheid. Die skare onder die Roberts-gesin kom al hoe nader.

“Komaan,” sê Fred. Hy gryp Ginny se hand en trek haar na die woud. Harry, Ron, Hermien en George volg hulle. Toe hulle by die bome kom, kyk almal terug. Die skare onder die Roberts-gesin is nou groter as tevore; hulle kan sien dat die townaars van die Ministerie probeer om by die gemaskerde townaars in die middel te kom, maar hulle sukkel baie. Dit lyk asof hulle bang is om ’n towerspreuk te gebruik wat die Roberts-gesin kan laat val.

Die gekleurde lanterns wat die pad na die stadion verlig, is uitgedoof. Donker figure strompel deur die bome; kinders huil; benoude krete en paniekbevange stemme weerklink om hulle in die koue naglug. Harry voel hoe hy deur mense wie se gesigte hy nie kan sien nie, rondgestamp en gestoot word. Dan hoor hy hoe Ron gil van pyn.

“Wat het gebeur?” sê Hermien benoud en steek so skielik vas dat Harry in haar vasloop. “Ron, waar is jy? O, dit is dom – *Lumos!*”

Sy laat haar towerstaf brand en skyn met die smal ligstraal oor die pad. Ron lê uitgestrek op die grond.

“Het oor ’n boomwortel gestruik,” sê hy ergerlik toe hy orent kom. “Met sulke groot voete is dit nie moeilik nie,” sê ’n dralende stem agter hulle.

Harry, Ron en Hermien kyk vinnig om. Draco Malfoy staan alleen naby hulle. Hy leun teen ’n boom en lyk heeltemal ontspanne. Sy arms is gekruis en dit lyk asof hy die toneel op die kampeerterrein deur ’n gaping tussen die bome bekijk het.

Ron sê vir Malfoy om iets te doen wat Harry weet hy nooit sal waag om voor mev. Weasley te sê nie.

“Jou taal, Weasley,” sê Malfoy en sy bleek oë skitter. “Moet julle nie liever aanstalties maak nie? Julle wil tog nie hê dat iemand vir *haar* moet raak sien nie, of hoe?”

Hy knik sy kop na Hermien en op daardie selfde oomblik weerklink

iets soos 'n bomontploffing deur die kampeerterrein en vir 'n oomblik veilig 'n groen ligstraal die bome om hulle.

"En wat beteken dit miskien?" vra Hermien uitdagend.

"La Grange, hulle is agter Moggels aan," sê Malfoy. "Wil jy ook jou broek daar bo in die lug vir almal uitstal? Want as jy wil, moet jy net hier bly rondhang . . . hulle is hierheen op pad en dit sal ons almal lekker laat lag."

"Hermien is 'n heks," snou Harry.

"Nes jy wil, Potter," sê Malfoy en grinnik boosaardig. "As jy dink dat hulle nie 'n Modderbloed kan uitken as hulle een sien nie, bly net waar jy is."

"Pasop wat jy sê!" skree Ron. Almal weet dat "Modderbloed" 'n baie aanstootlike term vir 'n heks of towenaar met Moggelouers is.

"Los dit, Ron," sê Hermien vinnig terwyl sy Ron aan die arm gryp om hom terug te hou toe hy 'n tree na Malfoy toe gee.

Daar kom 'n slag van die ander kant van die bome af, harder as enigiets wat hulle nog gehoor het. Verskeie mense in die nabyheid skree.

Malfoy giggel saggies. "Skrik maklik, nè?" sê hy luiweg. "Julle pappie het seker vir julle gesê om weg te kruip? Wat probeer hy doen – Moggels red?"

"Waar is jou ouers?" sê Harry wat besig is om sy humeur te verloor. "Daar buite agter maskers?"

Malfoy draai sy gesig na Harry. Hy glimlag nog steeds. "Wel . . . as dit so is, sal ek mos nie vir jou sê nie, Potter, of hoe?"

"Ag, komaan," sê Hermien terwyl sy vol minagting na Malfoy kyk, "kom ons gaan soek die ander klomp."

"Hou daardie groot bossiekop van jou laag, La Grange," sê Malfoy smalend.

"Komaan," herhaal Hermien en trek vir Harry en Ron met die paadjie langs.

"Ek wed julle enigiets sy pa is een van daardie gemaskerde spul!" sê Ron vererg.

"Wel, met 'n bietjie geluk sal die Ministerie hom uitvang!" sê Hermien hartstogtelik. "O, ek glo dit nie, waar is die ander ouens?"

Fred, George en Ginny is nêrens te sien nie, hoewel die pad wemel van mense wat almal benoud oor hul skouers na die beroering by die kampeerterrein staar.

'n Entjie verder aan is 'n groepie tieners in nagklere luidkeels aan die stry. Toe hulle vir Harry, Ron en Hermien sien, draai 'n meisie met dik, krullerige hare na hulle en sê vinnig, "*Ou est Madame Maxine? Nous l'avons perdue* –"

"H'm – wat?" sê Ron.

"O . . ." Die meisie wat gepraat het, draai haar rug op hom en toe hulle aanstap, hoor hulle duidelik hoe sy "Ogwarts" sê.

“Beauxbatons,” mompel Hermien.

“Hè?” sê Harry.

“Hulle gaan seker na Beauxbatons toe,” sê Hermien. “Julle weet . . . Beauxbatons Akademie vir Towerkuns . . . ek het daaroor gelees in ’n *Evaluering van Toweropleiding in Europa*.”

“O . . . h’m . . . ja,” sê Harry.

“Fred en George kan nie so ver weg wees nie,” sê Ron terwyl hy sy towerstaf uithaal, dit ook aansteek en met die voetpaadjie langs staan. Harry soek in sy baadjiesakke na sy eie towerstaf – maar kry dit nie. Al wat hy vind, is sy Omnikyker.

“Ag nee, ek glo dit nie . . . my towerstaf is weg!”

“Jy jok!”

Ron en Hermien lig hul towerstawwe hoog genoeg sodat die smal ligstrale wyer oor die grond val; Harry kyk oral om hom, maar sy towerstaf is nêrens te sien nie.

“Dalk is dit in die tent,” sê Ron.

“Dalk het dit uit jou sak geval toe ons gehardloop het?” stel Hermien besorg voor.

“Ja,” sê Harry, “dalk . . .”

Gewoonlik hou hy in die towerwêreld sy towerstaf te alle tye by hom en om nou, onder sulke omstandighede, daarsonder te wees, laat hom baie kwesbaar voel.

’n Ritselgeluid laat al drie van hulle wip. Knipogies, die huiself, spook om deur ’n digte bos daar naby te kom. Sy beweeg op ’n baie eienaardige manier, asof sy wegbeur van iets onsigbaars wat haar probeer terughou.

“Daar is slegte towenaars hier rond!” piep sy afgetrokke terwyl sy vooroor beur en sukkel om te hardloop. “Mense hoog – hoog in die lug! Knipogies moet maak dat sy wegkom!”

Met hierdie woorde verdwyn sy tussen die bome aan die oorkant van die paadjie terwyl sy hygend en kermend teen die mag veg wat haar teëhou.

“Wat gaan aan met haar?” Ron gaap haar nuuskierig agterna. “Hoe kom kan sy nie behoorlik hardloop nie?”

“Ek wed sy’t nie verlof gevra om te mag wegkruip nie,” sê Harry, gedagtig aan Dobbi. Elke keer dat hy iets gedoen het wat die Malfoys nie sou goedkeur nie, was hy gedwing om homself te slaan.

“Julle weet, huiselwe word regtig baie onregverdig behandel!” sê Hermien verontwaardig. “Dis slawerny, dis wat dit is! Daardie mnr. Crouch het haar gedwing om heel bo op die stadion te gaan sit en sy was doodbang, en hy’t haar getoor sodat sy nie eens kan weghardloop as hulle die tente begin plattrap nie! Hoekom *doen* niemand iets hieraan nie?”

“Wel, die elwe is tevrede, nie waar nie?” sê Ron. “Jy’t tog gehoor wat ou Knipogies daar by die wedstryd gesê het . . . ‘Huiselwe behoort nie

part te hê nie' . . . Dis vir haar lekker as iemand oor haar baasspeel."

"Dis mense soos jy, Ron," begin Hermien vererg, "wat korrupte en onregverdigde stelsels ondersteun net omdat hulle te lui is om –"

Nog 'n harde knal weerklink van die kant van die woud af.

"Kom ons loop net, oukei?" sê Ron en Harry sien hoe prikkelbaar hy na Hermien kyk. Dalk steek daar waarheid in wat Malfoy gesê het; dalk is Hermien in groter gevaar as hulle. Hulle loop weer verder. Harry soek nog steeds in sy sakke na sy towerstaf hoewel hy baie goed weet dat dit nie daar is nie.

Hulle volg die donker pad dieper die woud in en bly die hele tyd op die uitkyk vir Fred, George en Ginny. Hulle loop verby 'n groep aardmannetjies wat om 'n sak goud staan en kekkel. Hulle moet dit in 'n wedenskap op die wedstryd gewen het en dit lyk asof die moles by die kampeerterrein hulle nie in die minste pla nie. Verder aan langs die paadjie loop hulle 'n kol silwer lig binne. Toe hulle deur die bome kyk, sien hulle drie langbeen- en beeldskone Veela in 'n oopte staan, omring deur 'n klompie jong towenaars wat almal kliphard praat.

"Ek verdien elke jaar omtrent 'n honderd sakke Galjoene," skree een van hulle. "Ek's 'n draaklaksman vir die Komitee vir die Vernietiging van Gevaarlike Kreature."

"O nee, jy is nie," gil sy vriend, "jy was skottelgoed by die Kokende Pot . . . maar ek, ek is 'n vampierjagter, ek het sover al negentig doodgemaak –"

'n Derde jong towenaar, wie se puisies selfs in die Veela se dowwe silwer lig sigbaar is, onderbreek hulle. "Ek gaan binnekort die jongste Minister vir Towerkuns ooit word."

Harry snork van die lag. Hy het die towenaar met die puisies herken; sy naam is Daan Tolvermeyer en hy is die kondukteur op die trippel-dekker-Ridderbus.

Hy draai na Ron om hom te vertel, maar Ron se gesig het vreemd slap geword en die volgende oomblik gil hy, "Het ek al vir julle gesê dat ek 'n besemstok uitgevind het wat tot by Jupiter kan vlieg?"

"Regtig!" sê Hermien en sy en Harry gryp Ron ferm aan die arms, swaai hom om en sleep hom weg. Teen die tyd dat die geluid van die Veela en hul bewonderaars heeltemal vervaag het, is hulle in die hart van die woud. Dit lyk asof hulle nou alleen is; alles is baie stiller.

Harry kyk om hom rond. "Ek dink ons moet net hier wag, weet julle, ons sal iemand myle ver kan hoor aankom."

Sy woorde is skaars koud, toe verskyn Ludo Bagman van agter 'n boom reg voor hulle.

Selfs in die flou lig van die twee towerstawwe kan Harry sien dat Bagman verander het. Hy kom glad nie meer veerkragtig en rosig voor nie; daar is nie sprake van veerkrag in sy tred nie. Hy lyk gespanne en baie bleek.

“Wie’s daar?” sê hy terwyl hy sy oë knipper in ’n poging om hul gesigte uit te maak. “Wat maak julle hier, so op jul eie?”

Hulle kyk verbaas na mekaar.

“Wel – daar’s ’n soort opstoot aan die gang,” sê Ron.

Bagman gaap hom aan. “Wat?”

“Op die kampeerterein . . . van die towenaars het ’n Moggelgesin ontvoer en . . .”

Bagman vloek hardop en toe, sonder ’n verdere woord en met ’n klein plofgeluid, disappareer hy.

“Mnr. Bagman is nie in beheer nie, is hy?” sê Hermien fronsend.

“Hy was ’n wonderlike Breker,” sê Ron toe hy die voetpaadjie verlaat en na ’n klein oopte loop waar hy op ’n kol droë gras aan die voet van ’n boom gaan sit. “Die Wimbourne Wasps het die liga drie keer na mekaar gewen toe hy in hul span was.”

Hy haal die klein figuurtjie van Krum uit sy sak, sit dit op die grond neer en kyk vir ’n rukkie hoe dit op en af loop. Nes die regte Krum wag-gel die modelletjie effens en dit het ronde skouers. Hy lyk baie minder imposant op sy plat voete as op sy besemstok. Harry luister vir geluide wat van die kampeerterein kom. Dit klink asof alles nou weer stil is; dalk is die oproer verby.

“Ek hoop die ander ouens is oukei,” sê Hermien na ’n rukkie.

“Hulle sal wees,” sê Ron.

“Sê nou jou pa het vir Lucius Malfoy gevang,” sê Harry toe hy langs Ron gaan sit en kyk hoe die klein figuurtjie van Krum oor die dooie blare strompel. “Hy’t nog altyd gesê dat hy hom graag sal wil vastrek.”

“Dit sal die grynslag op ou Draco se gesig lekker afvee,” sê Ron.

“Daardie arme Moggels,” sê Hermien senuagtig. “Wat as hulle hulle nie ondertoe kan kry nie?”

“Hulle sal,” sê Ron gerusstellend, “daar sal ’n manier wees.”

“Dis tog mal om so iets te wil doen wanneer die hele Ministerie vir Towerkuns hier is!” sê Hermien. “Ek bedoel, hoe dink hulle miskien dat hulle hiermee gaan wegkom? Dink julle hulle is dronk, of is hulle net –”

Sy bly meteens stil en kyk oor haar skouer. Harry en Ron kyk ook vin-nig om. Dit klink asof iemand in die rigting van die oopte strompel. Hul-le wag en luister na die geluid van die hinkende voetstappe agter die donker bome. Dan kom die voetstappe skielik tot stilstand.

“Hallo?” roep Harry.

Dit is stil. Harry kom orent en loer om die boom. Dit is te donker om ver te kan sien, maar dit voel vir hom asof iemand net buite sy gesigsveld staan.

“Wie’s daar?” sê hy.

Toe, sonder waarskuwing, word die stilte verbreek deur ’n stem wat heeltemal anders is as enigeen wat hulle in die woud gehoor het; en dit

utter nie 'n paniekbevange kreet nie, maar iets wat soos 'n towerspreuk klink.

"MORSMORDRE!"

Toe bars 'n groot, groen, glinsterende iets uit die donker kol waar Harry nie kan sien nie en vlieg oor die boomtoppe die lug in.

"Wat de -?" snak Ron toe hy orent spring en na die ding staar wat bo hulle verskyn het.

Vir 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde dink Harry dat dit nog 'n aardmantjieformasie is. Toe besef hy dat dit 'n enorme kopbeen is, saamgestel uit wat soos smaraggroen sterre lyk. 'n Slang hang soos 'n tong voor by die mond uit. Voor hul oë styg dit al hoër en hoër op terwyl dit in 'n waas van groen rook gloei en soos 'n nuwe konstellasie teen die swart lug afgeteken staan.

Skielik is die woud om hulle gevul met krete. Die skedel het nou hoog genoeg gestyg om die hele woud soos 'n grieselige neonreklamebord te verlig. Harry tuur die duisternis in op soek na die persoon wat die kopbeen opgetower het, maar hy kan niemand sien nie.

"Wie's daar?" roep hy weer.

"Harry, komaan, *loop!*" Hermien gryp hom aan 'n baadjiepant en pluk hom agtertoe.

"Wat gaan met jou aan?" sê Harry geskok toe hy sien hoe bleek en verskrik haar gesig lyk.

"Dis die Donker Merk, Harry!" kerm Hermien terwyl sy hom met meening wegruk. "Jy-Weet-Wie se teken!"

"Woldemort s'n -?"

"Harry, komaan!"

Harry draai om, Ron raap sy miniatuur-Krum vinnig op, en die driestuks begin oor die oopte hardloop – maar voor hulle meer as 'n paar haastige tree kan gee, kondig 'n reeks plofgeluide die aankoms van omtrent twintig hekse en towenaars aan wat uit die niet verskyn het en hulle omsingel.

Harry tol om en in daardie breukdeel van 'n sekonde besef hy een ding: elkeen van hierdie towenaars hou 'n towerstaf vas en elke towerstaf is vol op hom, Ron en Hermien gerig. Sonder om twee keer te dink, gil hy "KOES!", gryp die ander twee en pluk hulle grond toe.

"BENEWEL!" brul twintig stemme. Daar is 'n verblindende reeks ligflitse en Harry voel hoe die hare op sy kop wapper asof 'n geweldige sterk wind skielik deur die oopte waai. Hy lig sy kop net effens en sien vurige strale rooi lig uit die towenaars se towerstawwe oor hulle vlieg, mekaar kruis, en van die boomstamme terugkaats die duisternis in –

"Hou op!" gil 'n stem wat hy ken. "HOU OP! *Dis my seun!*"

Harry se hare gaan lê. Hy lig sy kop 'n bietjie hoër. Die toenaar voor hom het sy towerstaf laat sak. Hy rol om en sien hoe mnr. Weasley, wat hoogs verskrik lyk, na hulle toe aangestap kom.

“Ron – Harry –” sy stem klink bewerig, “– Hermien – is julle oukei?”

“Gee pad, Arthur,” sê ’n koue stem kortaf.

Dit is mnr. Crouch. Hy en die ander towenaars van die Ministerie kom onverbiddelek nader. Harry staan op sodat hy na hulle kan kyk. Mnr. Crouch se gesig is vertrek van woede.

“Wie van julle het dit gedoen?” snou hy en sy skerp oë dartel oor hulle. “Wie van julle het die Donker Merk opgetower?”

“Dis nie ons nie!” sê Harry en hou sy hande, sonder ’n towerstaf, uit.

“Ons het niks gedoen nie!” sê Ron wat sy elmboog vryf en verontwaardig na sy pa staar. “Vir wat wil julle ons aanval?”

“Moenie lieg nie, mannetjie!” skree mnr. Crouch. Sy towerstaf wys nog steeds na Ron en sy oë peul uit sodat hy ietwat mallerig lyk. “Julle is op heterdaad betrap!”

“Barty,” fluister ’n heks in ’n lang wolkamerjas, “hulle is net kinders, Barty, hulle is nie daartoe in staat –”

“Waarvandaan het die Merk gekom, julle drie?” sê mnr. Weasley vin-nig.

“Van daar oorkant af,” sê Hermien bewerig en wys na die plek van waar hulle die stem hoor kom het, “daar was mense agter die bome . . . hulle het woorde geskree – ’n towerspreuk –”

“O, hulle het daar oorkant gestaan, nè,” sê mnr. Crouch en draai sy uitpeuloë na Hermien. Daar is ’n ongelowige uitdrukking op sy gesig. “Het ’n towerspreuk gesê, nè? Dit lyk asof jy besonder goed ingelig is oor hoe om die Merk op te roep, juffie –”

Dit lyk egter asof nie een van die towenaars van die Ministerie behal-we mnr. Crouch dink dat dit enigsins vir Harry, Ron of Hermien moont-lik kon gewees het om die skedel op te tower nie. Inteendeel, toe hulle Hermien se woorde hoor, lig hulle hul towerstawwe dadelik weer en rig hulle na waar sy beduie het terwyl hulle deur die donker bome tuur.

“Ons is te laat,” sê die heks in die wolkamerjas kopskuddend. “Hulle het gedisappareer.”

“Ek dink nie so nie,” sê ’n toenaar met ’n stoppelrige bruin baard. Dit is Amos Diggory, Cedric se pa. “Ons Bedwelmers het dwarsdeur daardie bome getrek . . . daar’s ’n goeie kans dat ons hulle getref het . . .”

“Amos, wees versigtig!” sê ’n paar van die towenaars waarskuwend toe mnr. Diggory sy skouers reguit maak, sy towerstaf lig, oor die oopte die donkerte in marsjeer en verdwyn. Hermien kyk hom agterna, met haar hande voor haar mond.

’n Paar oomblikke later hoor hulle mnr. Diggory roep.

“Ja! Ons het hulle! Daar’s iemand hier! Bewusteloos! Dis – maar – genade . . .”

“Jy het iemand?” skree mnr. Crouch en klink uiters ongelowig. “Wie? Wie is dit?”

Hulle hoor takke kraak, die geritsel van blare en toe knarsende voetstappe toe mnr. Diggory van agter die bome met 'n klein, slap figuurtjie in sy arms verskyn. Harry herken die afdroogdoek dadelik. Dit is Knipogies.

Mnr. Crouch staan roerloos sonder woorde toe mnr. Diggory sy elf op die grond voor sy voete neersit. Die ander towenaars van die Ministerie staan almal na mnr. Crouch. Vir 'n paar oomblikke staan mnr. Crouch vasgenael, sy oë gloeiend in sy bleek gesig terwyl hy na Knipogies kyk. Dan kry hy lewe.

“Dit – kan nie – wees nie,” stamel hy. “Nee –”

Hy beweeg vinnig om mnr. Diggory en stryk aan na die plek waar Knipogies gevind is.

“Dit help nie, mnr. Crouch,” roep Diggory agterna. “Daar’s niemand anders nie.”

Mnr. Crouch is egter nie van plan om hom op sy woord te neem nie. Hulle hoor hom beweeg en die geritsel van blare soos hy die bosse opsy sloot in sy soektog.

“Ietwat van 'n verleentheid,” sê mnr. Diggory grimmig terwyl hy na Knipogies se bewustelose liggaam kyk. “Barty Crouch se huiself . . . kan jy nou meer . . .”

“Los tog, Amos,” sê mnr. Weasley stil, “jy dink tog nie regtig dat dit die elf was nie? Die Donker Merk is 'n towenaarsteken. 'n Mens het 'n towerstaf daarvoor nodig.”

“Ja,” sê mnr. Diggory, “en sy het 'n towerstaf.”

“Wat?” sê mnr. Weasley.

“Hier, kyk.” Mnr. Diggory hou 'n towerstaf omhoog sodat mnr. Weasley kan sien. “Het dit in haar hand gehad. Dit is 'n oortreding van klousule drie van die Kode op die Gebruik van Towerstawwe. *Geen niemense-lyke kreatuur word toegelaat om 'n towerstaf te hanteer of te gebruik nie.*”

Net toe hoor hulle 'n harde plofgeluid en Ludo Bagman appaereer reg langs mnr. Weasley. Hy lyk uitasem en verward. Hy tol in die rondte en staan met groot oë na die smaraggroen skedel.

“Die Donker Merk!” hyg hy en trap amper op Knipogies toe hy vraend na sy kollegas draai. “Wie het dit gedoen? Het julle hulle vasgetrek? Barty! Wat gaan aan?”

Mnr. Crouch het met leë hande teruggekom. Sy gesig is nog steeds doodsbleek en sy hande en tandeborselsnor bewe.

“Waar was jy, Barty?” sê Bagman. “Hoekom was jy nie by die wedstryd nie? Jou elf het nog vir jou plek ook gehou – grote genugtig!” Bagman het so pas vir Knipogies by sy voete opgemerk. “Wat makeer haar?”

“Ek was besig, Ludo,” sê mnr. Crouch, wat nog steeds op dieselfde rukkerige manier praat, amper sonder om sy lippe te beweeg. “En my elf is bedwelm.”

“Bedwelm? Jy bedoel deur julle? Maar hoekom –?”

Begrip daal skielik op Bagman se ronde, blink gesig; hy kyk na die kopbeen, dan af na Knipogies en dan na mnr. Crouch.

“Neel!” sê hy. “Knipogies? Die Donker Merk opgetower? Sy weet tog nie hoe nie! Wat meer is, sy moet ’n towerstaf hê!”

“En sy het een gehad,” sê mnr. Diggory. “Toe ek haar gekry het, het sy een vasgehou, Ludo. As jy nie besware het nie, mnr. Crouch, stel ek voor dat ons hoor wat sy vir haarself te sê het.”

Crouch gee nie ’n teken dat hy mnr. Diggory gehoor het nie, maa mnr. Diggory beskou sy stilte as toestemming. Hy lig sy eie towerstaf, rig dit op Knipogies en sê, “*Ontwaak!*” Knipogies roer floutjies. Haar groot bruin oë gaan oop en sy knip hulle ’n paar keer verwilderd. Terwyl die towenaars in stilte toekyk, lig sy haarself bewend in ’n sittende posisie. Sy sien mnr. Diggory se voete en sy lig haar oë, stadig, huiwerig na sy gesig; toe, nog stadiger, kyk sy op in die lug. Harry sien die weerkaatsing van die swewende kopbeen in haar enorme, glasige oë. Sy snak na asem, kyk wildweg na die mense om haar en bars verskrik in trane uit.

“Elf,” sê mnr. Diggory streng. “Weet jy wie ek is? Ek is ’n lid van die Departement vir die Regulering en Beheer van Magiese Kreature!”

Knipogies wieg heen en weer op die grond en haar asem jaag. Sy herinner Harry sterk aan Dobbi in sy oomblikke van beangste ongehoorsaamheid.

“Soos jy kan sien, elf, is die Donker Merk kort gelede hier opgetower,” sê mnr. Diggory. “En jy is oomblikke later reg onder dit gevind! Verduidelik, asseblief!”

“Ek – ek – ek het dit nie gedoen nie, meneer!” sê Knipogies hortend. “Ek weet nie hoe nie, meneer!”

“Toe jy gevind is, het jy ’n towerstaf vasgehou!” blaf mnr. Diggory en swaai dit voor haar rond. Toe die towerstaf in die groen lig kom wat uit die skedel oor die oopte val, herken Harry dit dadelik.

“Haai – dis myne!” sê hy.

Almal kyk na hom.

“Verskoon my?” sê mnr. Diggory ongelowig.

“Dis my towerstaf!” sê Harry. “Ek het dit laat val!”

“Jy het dit laat val?” herhaal mnr. Diggory ongelowig. “Is dit ’n beken-tenis? Het jy dit weggegooi nadat jy die Donker Merk opgetower het?”

“Amos, besef jy met wie jy praat!” sê mnr. Weasley baie kwaai. “Is dit hoegenaamd waarskynlik dat *Harry Potter* die Donker Merk sal optower?”

“H’m – natuurlik nie,” mompel mnr. Diggory. “Jammer . . . is mee-gevoer . . .”

“Ek het dit ook nie daar laat val nie,” sê Harry en wys met sy duim na die bome reg onder die skedel. “Ek het besef dis weg net na ons by die woud in is.”

“So,” sê mnr. Diggory en sy oë verhard toe hy weer na Knipogies kyk wat inengekrimp aan sy voete lê. “Jy het hierdie towerstaf opgetel, h’m, of jy het dit opgetel en gedink jy kan pret hê daarmee, nie waar nie?”

“Ek het nie daarmee getoor nie, meneer!” kerm Knipogies terwyl die trane aan weerskante van haar plat knopneus afstroom. “Ek het . . . ek het . . . ek het dit net opgetel, meneer! Ek het nie die Donker Merk getoor nie, meneer, ek weet nie hoe nie!”

“Dit was nie sy nie!” sê Hermien. Sy lyk baie senuagtig om so voor al die towenaars van die Ministerie te praat, maar ook vasberade. “Knipogies, het ’n piepstemmetjie en die stem wat ons die towerspreuk hoor sê het, was baie dieper!” Sy kyk na Harry en Ron vir ondersteuning. “Dit het glad nie soos Knipogies geklink nie, nè?”

“Nee,” sê Harry en skud sy kop. “Dit het beslis nie soos ’n elf geklink nie.”

“Ja, dit was ’n menslike stem,” sê Ron.

“Wel, ons sal sien,” grom mnr. Diggory, wat glad nie beïndruk lyk nie. “Daar is ’n maklike manier om uit te vind wat die laaste towerspreuk was wat ’n towerstaf opgetower het, elf, het jy dit geweet?”

Knipogies bewe en skud haar kop so woes dat haar ore flap toe mnr. Diggory sy eie towerstaf lig en dit punt aan punt teen Harry s’n hou.

“*Prior Incantato!*” brul mnr. Diggory.

Harry hoor hoe Hermien geskok na haar asem snak toe ’n reuseskedel met ’n slang vir ’n tong uit die plek waar die twee towerstawwe aan mekaar raak, bars. Dit is egter ’n blote skaduwee van die groen skedel hoog bo hulle; dit lyk asof dit uit digte grys rook gemaak is: die spook van ’n towerkunsie.

“*Deletrius!*” skree mnr. Diggory en die wasige kopbeen verdwyn in ’n warreling van rook.

“So,” sê mnr. Diggory met ’n wrede soort behae terwyl hy na Knipogies staar wat nog steeds onbeheers bewe.

“Dit issie ekkie, meneer!” gil sy en haar oë rol beangs. “Dit issie, dit issie, ek wetie hoe nie! Ek’s ’n goeie elf, ek speel nie met toorstawwe nie, ek wetie hoe nie!”

“Jy is op heterdaad betrap, elf!” brul mnr. Diggory. “Betrap met die skuldige towerstaf in jou hand!”

“Amos,” sê mnr. Weasley hard, “dink ’n bietjie . . . bitter min towenaars weet hoe om daardie towerspreuk te doen . . . waar sou sy dit geleer het?”

“Dalk probeer Amos aan die hand doen,” sê mnr. Crouch en elke lettergreep bewe van koue woede, “dat ek my daarop toelê om my werksmense te leer hoe om die Donker Merk op te tower?”

Daar is ’n lang en onaangename stilte.

Amos Diggory lyk geskok. “Mnr. Crouch . . . nee . . . nie in die minste nie . . .”

“Jy het reeds baie na daaraan gekom om die twee mense met die minste rede om die Merk op te tower, te beskuldig!” blaf mnr. Crouch. “Harry Potter – en ek self! Ek veronderstel jy ken die seun se geskiedenis, Amos?”

“Natuurlik – almal weet –” mompel mnr. Diggory wat uiters ongemaklik lyk.

“En ek neem aan dat jy onthou hoeveel keer in my loopbaan ek al bewys het dat ek die Donker Kunste en diegene wat dit beoefen, minag en haat?” skree mnr. Crouch wie se oë nou weer erg uitpeul.

“Mnr. Crouch, ek – ek het nooit probeer sê dat jy iets hiermee te doen het nie,” mompel Amos, wat nou tot agter sy stoppelrige bruin baard bloos.

“As jy my elf beskuldig, dan beskuldig jy my, Diggory!” skree mnr. Crouch. “Waar anders sou sy geleer het om dit op te tower?”

“Sy – sy kon dit enige plek opgetel het –”

“Presies, Amos,” sê mnr. Weasley. “Sy kon dit enige plek opgetel het . . . Knipogies?” sê hy goedig terwyl hy na die elf draai, maar sy koes asof hy ook op haar gaan skree. “Presies waar het jy Harry se towerstaf gekry?”

Knipogies draai die soom van haar afdroogdoek so erg dat dit tussen haar vingers uitrafel.

“Ek – ek het dit . . . het dit daar gekry, meneer . . .” fluister sy, “daar . . . tussen die bome, meneer . . .”

“Sien jy, Amos?” sê mnr. Weasley. “Wie ook al die Merk opgetower het, het waarskynlik kort daarna gedisappareer en Harry se towerstaf agtergelaat. ’n Uitgeslape ding om te doen, om nie jou eie towerstaf, wat jou kan weggee, te gebruik nie. En Knipogies was ongelukkig genoeg om oomblikke later op die towerstaf af te kom en dit op te tel.”

“Maar dan was sy net ’n paar tree van die skuldige af!” sê mnr. Diggory ongeduldig. “Elf, het jy enigiemand gesien?”

Nou bewe Knipogies nog erger as tevore. Haar enorme oë flikker van mnr. Diggory na Ludo Bagman en toe weer na mnr. Crouch.

Dan sluk sy swaar en sê, “Ek het niemand gesien nie, meneer . . . niemand . . .”

“Amos,” sê mnr. Crouch kortaf, “ek is heeltemal bewus daarvan dat in die normale verloop van sake jy Knipogies vir ondervraging na jou departement moet neem. Ek vra jou egter om my toe te laat om met haar af te reken.”

Dit lyk nie asof mnr. Diggory baie in sy skik met hierdie voorstel is nie, maar Harry kan sien dat mnr. Crouch so ’n belangrike lid van die Ministerie is dat hy dit nie durf waag om te weier nie.

“Jy kan gerus wees dat sy gestraf sal word,” sê mnr. Crouch kil.

“M-m-meester . . .” stamel Knipogies terwyl sy met oë wat in trane swem van mnr. Crouch kyk. “M-m-meester, a-a-asseblief . . .”

Mnr. Crouch staar terug na haar, sy gesig skerper as tevore, en dis asof elke lyn daarop dieper afgeteken is. Daar is geen genade in sy blik te bespeur nie. “Knipogies het haar vannag op ’n manier gedra wat ek nie moontlik geag het nie,” sê hy afgemete. “Ek het vir haar gesê om in die tent te bly. Ek het vir haar gesê om daar te wag terwyl ek die probleme uitsonder. Nou moet ek uitvind dat sy ongehoorsaam was. Dit beteken klere.”

“Nee!” gil Knipogies en gooi haarself aan mnr. Crouch se voete. “Nee, meester! Nie klere nie, nie klere nie!”

Harry weet dat behoorlike klere die enigste manier is om ’n huiself vry te stel. Dit is jammerlik om te sien hoe Knipogies aan haar afdroogdoek klou terwyl sy snikkend aan mnr. Crouch se voete lê.

“Maar sy was bang!” bars Hermien woedend uit en gluur na mnr. Crouch. “U elf is bang vir hoogtes en daardie towenaars in die maskers het mense in die lug laat sweef! U kan haar nie blameer as sy uit hul pad wou kom nie!”

Mnr. Crouch gee ’n tree agteruit om homself van kontak met die elf te bevry terwyl hy na haar staar asof sy iets vuils en vrots is wat sy blinkgepoleerde skoene besmeer.

“Ek het geen nut vir ’n huiself wat ongehoorsaam is nie,” sê hy koud vir Hermien. “Ek het geen nut vir ’n dienskneg wat vergeet wat sy aan haar meester en aan sy reputasie verskuldig is nie.”

Knipogies huil so hard dat haar snikke deur die oopte weergalm.

Daar is ’n baie onaangename stilte wat deur mnr. Weasley beëindig word toe hy bedaard sê, “Wel, ek dink ek sal my klompie terugneem tent toe, as niemand enige besware het nie. Amos, daardie towerstaf het alles wat hy kon vir ons vertel – as Harry dit dalk kan terugkry, asseblief –”

Mnr. Diggory gee die towerstaf vir Harry en Harry steek dit in sy sak.

“Komaan, julle drie,” sê mnr. Weasley stil. Dit lyk egter nie asof Hermien wil beweeg nie; haar oë rus nog steeds op die snikkende elf. “Hermien!” sê mnr. Weasley dringender. Sy draai om en volg Harry en Ron oor die oopte en tussen die bome deur.

“Wat gaan met Knipogies gebeur?” vra Hermien die oomblik toe hulle buite hoorafstand is.

“Ek weet nie,” sê mnr. Weasley.

“Die manier waarop hulle haar behandel het!” sê Hermien woedend. “Mnr. Diggory wat haar die hele tyd ‘elf’ noem . . . en mnr. Crouch! Hy weet sy het dit nie gedoen nie en hy gaan haar nog steeds die trekpas gee! Dit traak hom nie hoe bang sy was nie, of hoe ontsteld sy is nie – dis asof sy nie eens ’n mens is nie!”

“Wel, sy is nie,” sê Ron.

“Dit beteken nie dat sy nie gevoelens het nie, Ron,” vlieg Hermien hom in, “dis walglik om te sien hoe –”

“Hermien, ek stem met jou saam,” sê mnr. Weasley vinnig terwyl hy

vir haar beduie om op te skud, "maar dis nie nou die tyd om elweregte te bespreek nie. Ek wil so gou moontlik by ons tent kom. Wat het van die ander ouens geword?"

"Ons het hulle in die donker verloor," sê Ron. "Pa, hoekom is almal so omgekrap oor daardie kopbeending?"

"Ek sal verduidelik sodra ons by die tent is," sê mnr. Weasley gespanne.

Toe hulle egter die kant van die woud bereik, word hulle voorgekeer. 'n Groot skare verskrikte hekse en towenaars het daar versamel en toe hulle mnr. Weasley sien aankom, storm baie van hulle nader. "Wat gaan daar aan?" "Wie het dit opgetower?" "Arthur – dis darem seker nie – hy nie," sê mnr. Weasley ongeduldig. "Ons weet nie wie dit was nie, maar dit lyk asof hulle gedisappareer het. Verskoon my, asseblief, ek wil bed toe gaan."

Hy lei Harry, Ron en Hermien deur die gedrang terug kampeerterrein toe. Nou is alles stil; daar is nie 'n teken van die gemaskerde towenaars nie, hoewel baie van die verwoeste tente nog steeds smeul.

Charlie steek sy kop by die seuns se tent uit.

"Pa, wat is aan die gang?" roep hy uit die donkerte. "Fred, George en Ginny het teruggekom, maar die ander –"

"Hulle is hier by my," sê mnr. Weasley terwyl hy afbuk en by die tent ingaan. Harry, Ron en Hermien gaan agterna.

Bill sit by die klein kombuistafel met 'n laken teen sy arm wat kwaai bloei. Charlie se hemp is geskeur en Percy se neus is bebloed. Dit lyk asof Fred, George en Ginny nie beseer is nie, maar hulle lyk ontsteld.

"Het Pa hulle gekry?" vra Bill skerp. "Die mense wat die Merk opgetower het?"

"Nee," sê mnr. Weasley. "Ons het Barty Crouch se elf gekry met Harry se towerstaf, maar ons het nie 'n idee wie die Merk opgetower het nie."

"Wat?" sê Bill, Charlie en Percy tegelyk.

"Harry se towerstaf?" sê Fred.

"Mnr. Crouch se elf?" sê Percy en hy klink dronkgeslaan.

Met 'n bietjie hulp van Harry, Ron en Hermien verduidelik mnr. Weasley wat in die woud gebeur het. Toe hulle klaar is, swel Percy van verontwaardiging.

"Wel, mnr. Crouch is reg om van so 'n elf ontslae te raak!" sê hy. "Om sowaar weg te hardloop toe hy uitdruklik vir haar gesê het om dit nie te doen nie . . . om hom voor die hele Ministerie in die verleentheid te stel . . . hoe sou dit gelyk het as sy voor die Departement vir die Regulering en Beheer van –"

"Sy het niks gedoen nie – sy was net op die verkeerde plek op die verkeerde tyd!" snou Hermien vir Percy toe, wat oorbluf lyk. Hermien het nog altyd redelik goed met Percy oor die weg gekom – beter as enige van die ander.

"Hermien, 'n towenaar in mnr. Crouch se posisie kan nie bekostig om huiself te hê wat amok maak met towerstawwe nie!" sê Percy uit die hoogte toe hy weer beheer oor homself het.

"Sy het nie amok gemaak nie!" skree Hermien. "Sy het dit net van die grond af opgetel!"

"Luister, kan enigiemand vir my verduidelik wat daardie kopbeen nou eintlik was?" sê Ron ongeduldig. "Dit het niemand enige kwaad aangedoen nie . . . wat is kamma so erg daaraan?"

"Ek het jou gesê, dis Jy-Weet-Wie se simbool, Ron," sê Hermien voor enigiemand anders kan antwoord. "Ek het daaroor in *Die opkoms en val van die Donker Kunste* gelees."

"En dit is dertien jaar gelede laas gesien," sê mnr. Weasley stilweg. "Natuurlik sal mense paniekerig word . . . dit was amper soos om vir Jy-Weet-Wie terug te sien."

"Ek verstaan dit nie," sê Ron fronsend. "Ek bedoel . . . dit is tog net 'n lutsoen in die lug . . ."

"Ron, Jy-Weet-Wie en sy volgelinge het die Donker Merk die lug ingestuur elke keer dat hulle gemoor het," sê mnr. Weasley. "Die terreur wat dit gesaai het . . . jy het nie 'n idee nie, jy is te jonk. Stel jou voor jy kom huis toe en jy sien die Donker Merk oor jou huis en jy weet wat jy daarbinne gaan kry . . ." Mnr. Weasley ril. "Elkeen se ergste vrees . . . die heel ergste . . ."

Vir 'n oomblik is almal stil.

Toe sê Bill, wat die laken van sy arm afgehaal het om na die sny te kyk, "Wel, dit het ons nie vannag gehelp nie, wie dit ook al opgetower het. Dit het die Doodseters weggejaag die oomblik toe hulle dit sien. Hulle het almal gedisappareer voor ons na genoeg aan hulle kon kom om enige van hulle te ontmasker. Ons het darem die Roberts-gesin gevang gekry voor hulle die grond getref het. Hul geheues word op die oomblik gewysig."

"Doodseters?" sê Harry. "Wat is Doodseters?"

"Dis wat Jy-Weet-Wie se ondersteuners hulself genoem het," sê Bill. "Ek dink ons het vannag diegene gesien wat oorgebly het – of ten minste diegene wat dit reggekry het om uit Azkaban te bly."

"Ons kan nie bewys dat dit hulle was nie, Bill," sê mnr. Weasley. "Hoe-wel dit na alle waarskynlikheid so is," voeg hy magteloos by.

"Ja, ek wed dit is!" sê Ron skielik. "Pa, ons het vir Draco Malfoy in die woud raakgeloop en hy het feitlik in soveel woorde gesê dat sy pa een van daardie malles in maskers is! En ons weet almal dat die Malfoys in was met Jy-Weet-Wie!"

"Maar wat het in Woldemort se ondersteuners –" begin Harry. Almal krimp ineen – soos amper almal in die towerwêreld gebruik die Weasleys nooit Woldemort se naam nie. "Jammer," sê Harry gou. "Wat het in Jy-Weet-Wie se ondersteuners se koppe aangegaan toe hulle die Moggels

laat sweef het? Ek bedoel, wat het hulle nou eintlik probeer bereik?"

"Bereik?" sê mnr. Weasley met 'n hol laggie. "Harry, dis hul idee van pret. Toe Jy-Weet-Wie nog geheers het, is goed die helfte van die moorde op Moggels vir die pret gepleeg. Ek sou sê hulle het vannag 'n paar kappe gemaak en toe kon hulle die versoeking om vir die res van ons te wys hoe baie van hulle nog op vrye voet is, net nie weerstaan nie. 'n Lekker ou reünietjie," voeg hy ergerlik by.

"Maar as hulle *wel* die Doodseters is, hoekom het hulle gedisappareer die oomblik toe hulle die Donker Merk sien?" sê Ron. "Hulle moes mos bly gewees het om dit te sien, nie waar nie?"

"Gebruik jou verstand, Ron," sê Bill. "As hulle regtig Doodseters is, het hulle hard gewerk om uit Azkaban te bly toe Jy-Weet-Wie sy mag verloor het. Hulle moet allerhande leuens vertel het oor hoe hy hulle gedwing het om mense dood te maak en te martel. Ek wed hulle gaan nog banger as die res van ons wees as hy moet terugkom. Toe hy sy magte verloor het, het hulle ontken dat hulle enigiets met hom te doen gehad het en voortgegaan met hul lewe . . . Ek dink nie hy gaan alte in sy skik met hulle wees nie, en jy?"

"Dus . . . wie ook al die Donker Merk opgetower het . . ." sê Hermien stadig, "het hulle dit dan gedoen om te wys dat hulle die Doodseters ondersteun, of om hulle af te skrik?"

"Dit weet niemand nie, Hermien," sê mnr. Weasley. "Maar ek sal jou dit sê . . . dis net die Doodseters wat weet hoe om dit op te tower. Ek sal baie verbaas wees as die persoon wat dit gedoen het, nie voorheen 'n Doodseter was nie, selfs al is hy nou dalk nie meer een nie . . . Luister, dis baie laat en as jul ma moet hoor wat gebeur het, sal sy haar morsdood bekommer. Kom ons kry 'n paar uur se slaap in en dan vat ons 'n vroeë poortsleutel huis toe."

Toe Harry op sy slaapbank gaan lê, draai sy kop. Hy weet hy behoort pootuit te voel; dit is al amper drie-uur in die oggend, maar hy is wawyd wakker – wawyd wakker en bekommerd.

Drie dae gelede – dit voel baie langer, maar dit is net drie dae – het hy wakker geword met 'n litteken wat brand. Vannag, vir die eerste keer in dertien jaar, het die heer Woldemort se Merk in die lug verskyn. Wat beteken dit alles?

Hy dink aan die brief wat hy vir Sirius geskryf het voor hy by Ligusterlaan weg is. Sou Sirius dit al gekry het? Wanneer sal hy daarop antwoord? Harry lê en staar na die seil bo hom, maar nou is daar geen fantasieë oor 'n gevlieg om hom aan die slaap te sus nie en dit is eers lank na Charlie al begin snork het dat Harry uiteindelik wegdommel.

CHAPTER TEN



MAYHEM AT THE MINISTRY

Mr. Weasley woke them after only a few hours sleep. He used magic to pack up the tents, and they left the campsite as quickly as possible, passing Mr. Roberts at the door of his cottage. Mr. Roberts had a strange, dazed look about him, and he waved them off with a vague “Merry Christmas.”

“He’ll be all right,” said Mr. Weasley quietly as they marched off onto the moor. “Sometimes, when a person’s memory’s modified, it makes him a bit disorientated for a while . . . and that was a big thing they had to make him forget.”

They heard urgent voices as they approached the spot where the Portkeys lay, and when they reached it, they found a great number of witches and wizards gathered around Basil, the keeper of the

Portkeys, all clamoring to get away from the campsite as quickly as possible. Mr. Weasley had a hurried discussion with Basil; they joined the queue, and were able to take an old rubber tire back to Stoatshead Hill before the sun had really risen. They walked back through Ottery St. Catchpole and up the damp lane toward the Burrow in the dawn light, talking very little because they were so exhausted, and thinking longingly of their breakfast. As they rounded the corner and the Burrow came into view, a cry echoed along the lane.

“Oh thank goodness, thank goodness!”

Mrs. Weasley, who had evidently been waiting for them in the front yard, came running toward them, still wearing her bedroom slippers, her face pale and strained, a rolled-up copy of the *Daily Prophet* clutched in her hand.

“Arthur — I’ve been so worried — *so worried* —”

She flung her arms around Mr. Weasley’s neck, and the *Daily Prophet* fell out of her limp hand onto the ground. Looking down, Harry saw the headline: *SCENES OF TERROR AT THE QUIDDITCH WORLD CUP*, complete with a twinkling black-and-white photograph of the Dark Mark over the treetops.

“You’re all right,” Mrs. Weasley muttered distractedly, releasing Mr. Weasley and staring around at them all with red eyes, “you’re alive. . . . Oh *boys* . . .”

And to everybody’s surprise, she seized Fred and George and pulled them both into such a tight hug that their heads banged together.

“*Ouch!* Mum — you’re strangling us —”

“I shouted at you before you left!” Mrs. Weasley said, starting to

sob. “It’s all I’ve been thinking about! What if You-Know-Who had got you, and the last thing I ever said to you was that you didn’t get enough O.W.L.s? Oh Fred . . . George . . .”

“Come on, now, Molly, we’re all perfectly okay,” said Mr. Weasley soothingly, prising her off the twins and leading her back toward the house. “Bill,” he added in an undertone, “pick up that paper, I want to see what it says. . . .”

When they were all crammed into the tiny kitchen, and Hermione had made Mrs. Weasley a cup of very strong tea, into which Mr. Weasley insisted on pouring a shot of Ogdens Old Firewhisky, Bill handed his father the newspaper. Mr. Weasley scanned the front page while Percy looked over his shoulder.

“I knew it,” said Mr. Weasley heavily. “*Ministry blunders . . . culprits not apprehended . . . lax security . . . Dark wizards running unchecked . . . national disgrace . . .* Who wrote this? Ah . . . of course . . . Rita Skeeter.”

“That woman’s got it in for the Ministry of Magic!” said Percy furiously. “Last week she was saying we’re wasting our time quibbling about cauldron thickness, when we should be stamping out vampires! As if it wasn’t *specifically* stated in paragraph twelve of the Guidelines for the Treatment of Non-Wizard Part-Humans —”

“Do us a favor, Perce,” said Bill, yawning, “and shut up.”

“I’m mentioned,” said Mr. Weasley, his eyes widening behind his glasses as he reached the bottom of the *Daily Prophet* article.

“Where?” spluttered Mrs. Weasley, choking on her tea and whisky. “If I’d seen that, I’d have known you were alive!”

“Not by name,” said Mr. Weasley. “Listen to this: *‘If the terrified*

wizards and witches who waited breathlessly for news at the edge of the wood expected reassurance from the Ministry of Magic, they were sadly disappointed. A Ministry official emerged some time after the appearance of the Dark Mark alleging that nobody had been hurt, but refusing to give any more information. Whether this statement will be enough to quash the rumors that several bodies were removed from the woods an hour later, remains to be seen.' Oh really," said Mr. Weasley in exasperation, handing the paper to Percy. "Nobody was hurt. What was I supposed to say? *Rumors that several bodies were removed from the woods . . .* well, there certainly will be rumors now she's printed that."

He heaved a deep sigh. "Molly, I'm going to have to go into the office; this is going to take some smoothing over."

"I'll come with you, Father," said Percy importantly. "Mr. Crouch will need all hands on deck. And I can give him my cauldron report in person."

He bustled out of the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley looked most upset.

"Arthur, you're supposed to be on holiday! This hasn't got anything to do with your office; surely they can handle this without you?"

"I've got to go, Molly," said Mr. Weasley. "I've made things worse. I'll just change into my robes and I'll be off. . . ."

"Mrs. Weasley," said Harry suddenly, unable to contain himself, "Hedwig hasn't arrived with a letter for me, has she?"

"Hedwig, dear?" said Mrs. Weasley distractedly. "No . . . no, there hasn't been any post at all."

Ron and Hermione looked curiously at Harry. With a meaningful look at both of them he said, "All right if I go and dump my stuff in

your room, Ron?”

“Yeah . . . think I will too,” said Ron at once. “Hermione?”

“Yes,” she said quickly, and the three of them marched out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

“What’s up, Harry?” said Ron, the moment they had closed the door of the attic room behind them.

“There’s something I haven’t told you,” Harry said. “On Saturday morning, I woke up with my scar hurting again.”

Ron’s and Hermione’s reactions were almost exactly as Harry had imagined them back in his bedroom on Privet Drive. Hermione gasped and started making suggestions at once, mentioning a number of reference books, and everybody from Albus Dumbledore to Madam Pomfrey, the Hogwarts nurse. Ron simply looked dumbstruck.

“But — he wasn’t there, was he? You-Know-Who? I mean — last time your scar kept hurting, he was at Hogwarts, wasn’t he?”

“I’m sure he wasn’t on Privet Drive,” said Harry. “But I was dreaming about him . . . him and Peter — you know, Wormtail. I can’t remember all of it now, but they were plotting to kill . . . someone.”

He had teetered for a moment on the verge of saying “me,” but couldn’t bring himself to make Hermione look any more horrified than she already did.

“It was only a dream,” said Ron bracingly. “Just a nightmare.”

“Yeah, but was it, though?” said Harry, turning to look out of the window at the brightening sky. “It’s weird, isn’t it? . . . My scar hurts, and three days later the Death Eaters are on the march, and Voldemort’s sign’s up in the sky again.”

“Don’t — say — his — name!” Ron hissed through gritted teeth.

“And remember what Professor Trelawney said?” Harry went on, ignoring Ron. “At the end of last year?”

Professor Trelawney was their Divination teacher at Hogwarts. Hermione’s terrified look vanished as she let out a derisive snort.

“Oh Harry, you aren’t going to pay attention to anything that old fraud says?”

“You weren’t there,” said Harry. “You didn’t hear her. This time was different. I told you, she went into a trance — a real one. And she said the Dark Lord would rise again . . . *greater and more terrible than ever before* . . . and he’d manage it because his servant was going to go back to him . . . and that night Wormtail escaped.”

There was a silence in which Ron fidgeted absentmindedly with a hole in his Chudley Cannons bedspread.

“Why were you asking if Hedwig had come, Harry?” Hermione asked. “Are you expecting a letter?”

“I told Sirius about my scar,” said Harry, shrugging. “I’m waiting for his answer.”

“Good thinking!” said Ron, his expression clearing. “I bet Sirius’ll know what to do!”

“I hoped he’d get back to me quickly,” said Harry.

“But we don’t know where Sirius is . . . he could be in Africa or somewhere, couldn’t he?” said Hermione reasonably. “Hedwig’s not going to manage *that* journey in a few days.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Harry, but there was a leaden feeling in his stomach as he looked out of the window at the Hedwig-free sky.

“Come and have a game of Quidditch in the orchard, Harry,” said

Ron. “Come on — three on three, Bill and Charlie and Fred and George will play. . . . You can try out the Wronski Feint. . . .”

“Ron,” said Hermione, in an I-don’t-think-you’re-being-very-sensitive sort of voice, “Harry doesn’t want to play Quidditch right now. . . . He’s worried, and he’s tired. . . . We all need to go to bed. . . .”

“Yeah, I want to play Quidditch,” said Harry suddenly. “Hang on, I’ll get my Firebolt.”

Hermione left the room, muttering something that sounded very much like “*Boys.*”

Neither Mr. Weasley nor Percy was at home much over the following week. Both left the house each morning before the rest of the family got up, and returned well after dinner every night.

“It’s been an absolute uproar,” Percy told them importantly the Sunday evening before they were due to return to Hogwarts. “I’ve been putting out fires all week. People keep sending Howlers, and of course, if you don’t open a Howler straight away, it explodes. Scorch marks all over my desk and my best quill reduced to cinders.”

“Why are they all sending Howlers?” asked Ginny, who was mending her copy of *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* with Spellotape on the rug in front of the living room fire.

“Complaining about security at the World Cup,” said Percy. “They want compensation for their ruined property. Mundungus Fletcher’s put in a claim for a twelve-bedroomed tent with en-suite Jacuzzi, but I’ve got his number. I know for a fact he was sleeping under a cloak propped on sticks.”

Mrs. Weasley glanced at the grandfather clock in the corner. Harry liked this clock. It was completely useless if you wanted to know the time, but otherwise very informative. It had nine golden hands, and each of them was engraved with one of the Weasley family's names. There were no numerals around the face, but descriptions of where each family member might be. "Home," "school," and "work" were there, but there was also "traveling," "lost," "hospital," "prison," and, in the position where the number twelve would be on a normal clock, "mortal peril."

Eight of the hands were currently pointing to the "home" position, but Mr. Weasley's, which was the longest, was still pointing to "work." Mrs. Weasley sighed.

"Your father hasn't had to go into the office on weekends since the days of You-Know-Who," she said. "They're working him far too hard. His dinner's going to be ruined if he doesn't come home soon."

"Well, Father feels he's got to make up for his mistake at the match, doesn't he?" said Percy. "If truth be told, he was a tad unwise to make a public statement without clearing it with his Head of Department first —"

"Don't you dare blame your father for what that wretched Skeeter woman wrote!" said Mrs. Weasley, flaring up at once.

"If Dad hadn't said anything, old Rita would just have said it was disgraceful that nobody from the Ministry had commented," said Bill, who was playing chess with Ron. "Rita Skeeter never makes anyone look good. Remember, she interviewed all the Gringotts Charm Breakers once, and called me 'a long-haired pillock'?"

"Well, it *is* a bit long, dear," said Mrs. Weasley gently. "If you'd

just let me —”

“No, Mum.”

Rain lashed against the living room window. Hermione was immersed in *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4*, copies of which Mrs. Weasley had bought for her, Harry, and Ron in Diagon Alley. Charlie was darning a fireproof balaclava. Harry was polishing his Firebolt, the broomstick servicing kit Hermione had given him for his thirteenth birthday open at his feet. Fred and George were sitting in a far corner, quills out, talking in whispers, their heads bent over a piece of parchment.

“What are you two up to?” said Mrs. Weasley sharply, her eyes on the twins.

“Homework,” said Fred vaguely.

“Don’t be ridiculous, you’re still on holiday,” said Mrs. Weasley.

“Yeah, we’ve left it a bit late,” said George.

“You’re not by any chance writing out a new *order form*, are you?” said Mrs. Weasley shrewdly. “You wouldn’t be thinking of re-starting Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes, by any chance?”

“Now, Mum,” said Fred, looking up at her, a pained look on his face. “If the Hogwarts Express crashed tomorrow, and George and I died, how would you feel to know that the last thing we ever heard from you was an unfounded accusation?”

Everyone laughed, even Mrs. Weasley.

“Oh your father’s coming!” she said suddenly, looking up at the clock again.

Mr. Weasley’s hand had suddenly spun from “work” to “traveling”; a second later it had shuddered to a halt on “home” with the others,

and they heard him calling from the kitchen.

“Coming, Arthur!” called Mrs. Weasley, hurrying out of the room.

A few moments later, Mr. Weasley came into the warm living room carrying his dinner on a tray. He looked completely exhausted.

“Well, the fat’s really in the fire now,” he told Mrs. Weasley as he sat down in an armchair near the hearth and toyed unenthusiastically with his somewhat shriveled cauliflower. “Rita Skeeter’s been ferreting around all week, looking for more Ministry mess-ups to report. And now she’s found out about poor old Bertha going missing, so that’ll be the headline in the *Prophet* tomorrow. I *told* Bagman he should have sent someone to look for her ages ago.”

“Mr. Crouch has been saying it for weeks and weeks,” said Percy swiftly.

“Crouch is very lucky Rita hasn’t found out about Winky,” said Mr. Weasley irritably. “There’d be a week’s worth of headlines in his house-elf being caught holding the wand that conjured the Dark Mark.”

“I thought we were all agreed that that elf, while irresponsible, did *not* conjure the Mark?” said Percy hotly.

“If you ask me, Mr. Crouch is very lucky no one at the *Daily Prophet* knows how mean he is to elves!” said Hermione angrily.

“Now look here, Hermione!” said Percy. “A high-ranking Ministry official like Mr. Crouch deserves unswerving obedience from his servants —”

“His *slave*, you mean!” said Hermione, her voice rising passionately, “because he didn’t *pay* Winky, did he?”

“I think you’d all better go upstairs and check that you’ve packed

properly!” said Mrs. Weasley, breaking up the argument. “Come on now, all of you. . . .”

Harry repacked his broomstick servicing kit, put his Firebolt over his shoulder, and went back upstairs with Ron. The rain sounded even louder at the top of the house, accompanied by loud whistlings and moans from the wind, not to mention sporadic howls from the ghoul who lived in the attic. Pigwidgeon began twittering and zooming around his cage when they entered. The sight of the half-packed trunks seemed to have sent him into a frenzy of excitement.

“Bung him some Owl Treats,” said Ron, throwing a packet across to Harry. “It might shut him up.”

Harry poked a few Owl Treats through the bars of Pigwidgeon’s cage, then turned to his trunk. Hedwig’s cage stood next to it, still empty.

“It’s been over a week,” Harry said, looking at Hedwig’s deserted perch. “Ron, you don’t reckon Sirius has been caught, do you?”

“Nah, it would’ve been in the *Daily Prophet*,” said Ron. “The Ministry would want to show they’d caught *someone*, wouldn’t they?”

“Yeah, I suppose. . . .”

“Look, here’s the stuff Mum got for you in Diagon Alley. And she’s got some gold out of your vault for you . . . and she’s washed all your socks.”

He heaved a pile of parcels onto Harry’s camp bed and dropped the money bag and a load of socks next to it. Harry started unwrapping the shopping. Apart from *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4*, by Miranda Goshawk, he had a handful of new quills, a

dozen rolls of parchment, and refills for his potion-making kit — he had been running low on spine of lionfish and essence of belladonna. He was just piling underwear into his cauldron when Ron made a loud noise of disgust behind him.

“What is *that* supposed to be?”

He was holding up something that looked to Harry like a long, maroon velvet dress. It had a moldy-looking lace frill at the collar and matching lace cuffs.

There was a knock on the door, and Mrs. Weasley entered, carrying an armful of freshly laundered Hogwarts robes.

“Here you are,” she said, sorting them into two piles. “Now, mind you pack them properly so they don’t crease.”

“Mum, you’ve given me Ginny’s new dress,” said Ron, handing it out to her.

“Of course I haven’t,” said Mrs. Weasley. “That’s for you. Dress robes.”

“*What?*” said Ron, looking horror-struck.

“Dress robes!” repeated Mrs. Weasley. “It says on your school list that you’re supposed to have dress robes this year . . . robes for formal occasions.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” said Ron in disbelief. “I’m not wearing that, no way.”

“Everyone wears them, Ron!” said Mrs. Weasley crossly. “They’re all like that! Your father’s got some for smart parties!”

“I’ll go starkers before I put that on,” said Ron stubbornly.

“Don’t be so silly,” said Mrs. Weasley. “You’ve got to have dress robes, they’re on your list! I got some for Harry too . . . show him,

Harry. . . .”

In some trepidation, Harry opened the last parcel on his camp bed. It wasn’t as bad as he had expected, however; his dress robes didn’t have any lace on them at all — in fact, they were more or less the same as his school ones, except that they were bottle green instead of black.

“I thought they’d bring out the color of your eyes, dear,” said Mrs. Weasley fondly.

“Well, they’re okay!” said Ron angrily, looking at Harry’s robes. “Why couldn’t I have some like that?”

“Because . . . well, I had to get yours secondhand, and there wasn’t a lot of choice!” said Mrs. Weasley, flushing.

Harry looked away. He would willingly have split all the money in his Gringotts vault with the Weasleys, but he knew they would never take it.

“I’m never wearing them,” Ron was saying stubbornly. “Never.”

“Fine,” snapped Mrs. Weasley. “Go naked. And, Harry, make sure you get a picture of him. Goodness knows I could do with a laugh.”

She left the room, slamming the door behind her. There was a funny spluttering noise from behind them. Pigwidgeon was choking on an overlarge Owl Treat.

“Why is everything I own rubbish?” said Ron furiously, striding across the room to unstick Pigwidgeon’s beak.

Moleste by die Ministerie

Na net 'n paar uur se slaap maak mnr. Weasley hulle wakker. Hy gebruik towerspreuke om die tente mee af te slaan en op te pak. Hulle verlaat die kampeerterrein so vinnig moontlik en stap verby mnr. Roberts wat voor die deur van sy kothuis staan. Mnr. Roberts het 'n vreemde, verbysterde uitdrukking op sy gesig en waai vir hulle terwyl hy "Geseënde Kersfees" mompel.

"Hy sal regkom," sê mnr. Weasley gedemp toe hulle na die moeras stap. "Partykeer as 'n persoon se geheue gewysig is, maak dit hulle vir 'n rukkie so ietwat deurmekaar . . . en dit was iets groots wat hy moes vergeet."

Terwyl hulle aanstap na die plek waar die poortsleutels lê en wag, hoor hulle dringende stemme en toe hulle daar kom, drom 'n hele klomp hekse en towenaars reeds om Basil, die bewaker van die Poortsleutels, saam. Almal wil so gou moontlik van die kampeerplek af weggom. Mnr. Weasley voer 'n haastige gesprek met Basil; hulle gaan staan agter in die tou en kry 'n ou rubberband wat hulle terug na Stoatshead-heuwel toe neem nog voor die son behoortlik op is. Hulle stap in die skemerlig deur Ottery St Catchpole na Die Konynenes toe. Hulle is so moeg dat hulle baie min praat en gretig na hul ontbyt uitsien. Toe hulle om 'n draai in die laan kom van waar hulle Die Konynenes kan sien, weerklink 'n uitroep deur die klam laning.

"O, dankie tog, dankie tog!"

Mev. Weasley, wat duidelik in die voortuin op hulle gewag het, kom aangehardloop. Sy is nog in haar pantoffels, haar gesig is bleek en gespanne en sy hou 'n verkreukelde eksemplaar van die Daaglikse Profeet in haar hand vas. "Arthur – ek was so bekommerd – so bekommerd –"

Sy gooi haar arms om mnr. Weasley se nek en die *Daaglikse Profeet* val op die grond. Toe hy afkyk, sien Harry die hoofopskrif: **TONELE VAN TERREUR BY KWIDDIEK-WÊRELDBEKER**, asook 'n flikkerende swart-wit foto van die Donker Merk bo die boomtoppe.

"Julle makeer niks," fluister mev. Weasley gevoelvol toe sy mnr. Weasley laat los en met rooi oë om haar staar, "julle lewe . . . o, seuns . . ."

Tot almal se verbasing gryp sy vir Fred en George en vou hulle in so 'n stywe omhelsing toe dat hul koppe teen mekaar kap.

“Eina! Ma – Ma verwurg ons –”

“En ek het met julle geraas net voor julle weg is!” sê mev. Weasley snikkend. “Dis al waaraan ek nog die hele tyd dink! Wat as Jy-Weet-Wie julle in die hande gekry het en die laaste ding wat ek vir julle gesê het, is dat julle nie genoeg UILE het nie? O, Fred . . . George . . .”

“Kom nou, Molly, ons makeer absoluut niks,” sê mnr. Weasley troostend terwyl hy die tweeling loswikkell en haar huis toe lei. “Bill,” sê hy onderlangs, “tel tog die koerant op, ek wil sien wat daarin staan . . .”

Toe hulle almal in die klein kombuisie saamdrom en Hermien vir mev. Weasley 'n koppie sterk tee gemaak het waarby mnr. Weasley 'n skeutjie van Ogdens se Ou Vuurwhisky gevoeg het, gee Bill die koerant vir sy pa aan. Mnr. Weasley bekyk die voorblad terwyl Percy oor sy skouer loer.

“Ek het geweet dit gaan gebeur,” sê mnr. Weasley swaar. “Ministerie verbrou . . . skuldiges nie vasgetrek nie . . . lakse sekuriteit . . . Wie het dit geskryf? A . . . natuurlik . . . Rika Skinner.”

“Daardie vrou het haar mes in vir die Ministerie vir Towerkuns!” sê Percy woedend. “Verlede week het sy gesê dis tydmors om oor die dikte van heksetels te pieker terwyl daar vampiere is wat uitgewis moet word! Asof dit nie spesifiek in paragraaf twaalf van die Riglyne vir die Behandeling van Nie-Magiese Halfmense uitgestippel is dat –”

“Wees gaaf met ons, Perce,” sê Bill gapend, “en hou jou snater.”

“Ek word genoem,” sê mnr. Weasley en sy oë rek agter sy brilglase toe hy aan die einde van die artikel in die *Daaglikse Profeet* kom.

“Waar?” Mev. Weasley stik aan haar tee met whisky. “As ek dit gesien het, sou ek geweet het dat julle nog lewe!”

“Nie by die naam nie,” sê mnr. Weasley. “Luister hierna: ‘Indien die verskrikte hekse en towenaars wat asemloos aan die rand van die woud op nuus staan en wag het, versekering van die Ministerie vir Towerkuns ver wag het, is hulle diep teleurgestel. ’n Amptenaar van die Ministerie wat ’n rukkie na die verskyning van die Donker Merk opgedaag het, het beweer dat niemand beseer is nie, maar het geweier om verdere inligting te verskaf. Of hierdie stelling voldoende sal wees om ’n einde te maak aan gerugte dat etlike liggame ’n uur later uit die woud verwyder is, moet nog gesien word.’ Ag nee, regtig,” sê mnr. Weasley vererg toe hy die koerant vir Percy aangee. “Niemand is beseer nie, wat was ek veronderstel om te sê? Gerugte dat etlike liggame ’n uur later uit die woud verwyder is . . . Wel, noudat sy dit gesê het, sal daar beslis gerugte wees.”

Hy slaak ’n diep sug. “Molly, ek sal kantoor toe moet gaan, ek moet dinge daar gaan regvat.”

“Ek kom saam, Vader,” sê Percy gewigtig. “Mnr. Crouch sal alle hande

aan boord nodig hê. En dan kan ek my heksekettel-verslag persoonlik aan hom oorhandig.”

Hy skarrel by die kombuis uit.

Mev. Weasley lyk omgekrap. “Arthur, jy’s veronderstel om met vakansie te wees! Dit het niks met jou kantoor uit te waai nie, hulle kan dit darem seker sonder jou hanteer?”

“Ek moet gaan, Molly,” sê mnr. Weasley, “ek het sake met vererger. Ek trek gou my kleed aan en dan moet ek weg wees . . .”

“Mev. Weasley,” sê Harry skielik. Hy kan homself nie langer betuel nie. “Hedwig het nie dalk vir my ’n brief gebring nie, het sy?”

“Hedwig, skat?” sê mev. Weasley verstrooid. “Nee . . . nee, daar was geen pos nie.”

Ron en Hermien kyk verbaas na Harry.

Met ’n betekenisvolle blik na hulle toe, sê hy, “Is dit oukei as ek my goed in jou kamer gaan sit, Ron?”

“H’m . . . ek dink ek gaan saam,” sê Ron dadelik. “Hermien?”

“Ja,” sê sy vinnig en die driestuks marsjeer uit die kombuis en op met die trappe.

“Wat gaan aan, Harry?” sê Ron die oomblik toe die solderkamer se deur agter hulle toegaan.

“Daar is iets wat ek julle nie vertel het nie,” sê Harry. “Ek het Sondagoggend wakker geword omdat my litteken weer seer was.”

Ron en Hermien reageer feitlik presies soos Harry daar in sy slaapkamer in Ligusterlaan voorsien het. Hermien snak na asem en begin dadelik voorstelle maak. Sy noem ’n paar naslaanboeke op en almal van Albus Dompeldorius tot by Madame Pomfrey, Hogwarts se matrone.

Ron lyk bloot verslae. “Maar – hy was nie daar nie, was hy? Jy-Weet-Wie? Ek bedoel – laas keer toe jou litteken seer was, was hy by Hogwarts, of wat?”

“Ek is seker hy was nie in Ligusterlaan nie,” sê Harry, “maar ek het van hom gedroom . . . van hom en Pieter – julle weet, Wurmstert. Ek kan nie alles so lekker onthou nie, maar hulle het planne gemaak om . . . iemand te vermoor.”

Vir ’n oomblik het hy met die idee om “my” te sê, gespeel, maar hy kon homself nie sover bring om Hermien nog banger te laat lyk as wat sy reeds is nie.

“Dit was net ’n droom,” sê Ron bemoedigend. “Net ’n nagmerrie.”

“Ja, maar was dit?” sê Harry terwyl hy deur die venster staar na die lug wat al helderder word. “Dis snaaks, is dit nie . . . my litteken is seer en drie dae later hou die Doodseters ’n optog en Woldemort se teken hang weer eens in die lug.”

“Moenie – sy – naam – sê – nie!” sis Ron deur sy tande.

“En onthou julle wat professor Trelawney gesê het?” gaan Harry voort terwyl hy Ron ignoreer. “Aan die einde van laas jaar?”

Professor Trelawney is die onderwyser vir Waarsêery by Hogwarts.

Hermien se verskrikte uitdrukking verdwyn en sy uiter 'n snork van minagting. “O, Harry, jy gaan jou tog nie steur aan wat daardie ou bedrieër te sê het nie?”

“Jy was nie daar nie,” sê Harry. “Jy het haar nie gehoor nie. Hierdie keer was dit anders. Ek sê jou, sy't in 'n beswyming gegaan – 'n regte een. Toe't sy gesê dat die Donker Heer weer gaan verrys . . . groter en verskrikliker as tevore . . . en dat hy dit gaan regkry omdat sy dienskneg na hom sou gaan . . . en daardie nag het Wurmstert ontsnap.”

Almal is stil terwyl Ron ingedagte met 'n gat in sy Chudley Cannons-bedsprei speel.

“Hoekom het jy gevra of Hedwig al terug is, Harry?” vra Hermien. “Verwag jy 'n brief?”

“Ek het vir Sirius van my litteken vertel,” sê Harry skouerophalend. “Ek wag nog vir 'n antwoord.”

“Slim!” sê Ron en sy gesig helder op. “Ek wed Sirius sal weet wat om te doen!”

“Ek het gehoop dat hy my sommer gou sal antwoord,” sê Harry.

“Maar ons weet nie waar Sirius is nie . . . hy kan in Afrika of iewers wees, of hoe?” sê Hermien redelik. “Hedwig kan tog nie binne 'n paar dae so ver vlieg nie.”

“Ja, ek weet,” sê Harry, maar daar is 'n swaar gevoel in sy maag toe hy deur die venster na die lug kyk waarin geen teken van Hedwig te bespeur is nie.

“Kom ons gaan speel 'n bietjie Kwiddiek in die boord, Harry,” sê Ron. “Komaan – drie teen drie, Bill en Charlie en Fred en George sal speel . . . jy kan die Wronski-fnuikslag probeer . . .”

“Ron,” sê Hermien in 'n ek-dink-nie-jy-is-nou-baie-sensitief-nie soort stem. “Harry is nie nou lus vir Kwiddiek nie . . . hy's bekommerd en hy's moeg . . . ons moet almal 'n bietjie gaan lê . . .”

“Nee, ek's lus vir Kwiddiek,” sê Harry skielik. “Wag gou, ek kry my Vuurslag.”

Hermien stap by die kamer uit terwyl sy iets brom wat soos “Seuns” klink.

Die volgende week is nóg mnr. Weasley, nóg Percy baie by die huis. Vroeg elke oggend, voor die res van die gesin op is, verlaat hulle die huis en kom eers saans lank na aandete weer terug.

“Dit was 'n absolute stryd,” sê Percy gewigtig daardie Sondagaand voor hulle terug Hogwarts toe moet gaan. “Het die hele week lank vure doodgeslaan. Mense stuur Skellers wat, soos julle weet, ontplof as 'n mens dit

nie dadelik oopmaak nie. Het brandmerke oor my hele lessenaar en my beste veerpen is verkool.”

“Hoekom stuur hulle Skellers?” vra Ginny, wat besig is om haar eksemplaar van Eenduisend Magiese Paddastoele en Kruie op die mat voor die vuur in die woonkamer met kleeflint reg te maak.

“Kla oor die sekuriteit by die Wêreldbeker,” sê Percy. “Soek kompensasie vir besittings wat vernietig is. Mundungus Fletcher het ’n eis vir ’n tent met twaalf slaapvertreke en ’n en suite-jacuzzi ingegee, maar ek weet waarmee hy besig is. Ek weet vir ’n feit dat hy onder ’n kleed wat oor stokke oopgespalk was, geslaap het.”

Mev. Weasley tuur na die staanhorlosie in die hoek. Harry hou baie van hierdie horlosie. Dit is heeltemal nutteloos as jy wil weet hoe laat dit is, maar andersins is dit regtig leersaam. Dit het nege goue hande en die naam van een van die lede van die Weasley-gesin is op elkeen van hulle gegraveer. Daar is geen syfers op die gesig nie, maar wel beskrywings van waar elkeen van die gesinslede moontlik kan wees. “Tuis”, “skool” en “werk” is daar, maar ook “verdwaal”, “hospitaal”, “tronk” en, in die posisie waar die nommer twaalf gewoonlik is, “lewensgevaar”.

Agt van die hande wys tans na “tuis”, maar mnr. Weasley s’n, wat die langste is, staan nog steeds op “werk”. Mev. Weasley sug.

“Jul pa het nie nodig gehad om oor naweke kantoor toe te gaan sedert jy-Weet-Wie se tyd nie,” sê sy. “Hulle laat hom glads te hard werk. Sy aandete gaan geruïneer wees as hy nie binnekort by die huis is nie.”

“Wel, Vader voel hy moet vergoed vir die fout wat hy by die wedstryd gemaak het, of hoe?” sê Percy. “Ek moet sê, dit was ietwat onverstandig om ’n openbare aankondiging te maak sonder om dit eers met sy departementshoof uit te klaar –”

“Hoe durf jy jou pa blameer vir iets wat daardie mislike Skinner-vrou geskryf het!” sê mev. Weasley wat dadelik vlam vat.

“As Pa niks gesê het nie, dan het ou Rika weer gesê dat dit skandelik is dat niemand van die Ministerie kommentaar wou lewer nie,” sê Bill wat teen Ron skaak speel. “Rika Skinner laat niemand ooit goed lyk nie. Sy’t eenkeer onderhoude met Edulgolt se vloekbrekers gevoer en my ’n takhaar genoem, onthou julle?”

“Wel, jou hare is ’n bietjie lank, skat,” sê mev. Weasley gemoedelik. “As jy my net sal toelaat om –”

“Nee, Ma.”

Reëndruppels slaan teen die woonkamer se vensters. Hermien is verdiep in *Die Standaardhandleiding vir Goëlery, Graad 4*, waarvan mev. Weasley vir haar, Harry en Ron in Diagonaalstraat eksemplare gekoop het. Charlie is besig om ’n vuurbestande balaklawa reg te maak. Harry vryf sy Vuurslag blink. Die Besemstok Versienstel wat Hermien op sy dertiende verjaardag vir hom gegee het, staan oop by sy voete. Fred en George sit

in 'n hoek met hul veerpenne in hul hande en hul koppe gebuig oor 'n stuk perkament, terwyl hulle in fluisterstemme praat.

"Waarmee is julle twee besig?" vra mev. Weasley agterdogtig, haar oë op die tweeling.

"Huiswerk," sê Fred vaagweg.

"Moenie verspot wees nie, julle is nog met vakansie," sê mev. Weasley.

"Ag, ons het so 'n bietjie daarvan vergeet," sê George.

"Julle is nie dalk besig om 'n nuwe bestelvorm te maak nie, of hoe?" sê mev. Weasley uitgeslape. "Julle speel nie dalk met die idee om weer met Weasleys se Wonderpoetse te begin nie, of wat?"

"Regtig, Ma," sê Fred terwyl hy met 'n gekrenkte uitdrukking op sy gesig na haar kyk. "As die Hogwarts Express môre sou ontspoor en ek en George dood is, hoe sal Ma voel as Ma moet onthou dat ongegronde beskuldigings die laaste goed was wat ons moes aanhoor?"

Almal lag, tot mev. Weasley.

"A, jul pa is op pad!" sê sy skielik toe sy weer na die horlosie kyk.

Mnr. Weasley se hand het skielik van "werk" na "reis" gespring en 'n oomblik later kom dit sidderend saam met al die ander op "tuis" tot stilstand en hulle hoor hoe hy uit die kombuis roep.

"Ek kom, Arthur!" roep mev. Weasley en haas haar uit die vertrek.

'n Paar oomblikke later kom mnr. Weasley die warm woonvertrek binne met sy aandete op 'n skinkbord. Hy lyk gedaan.

"Wel, nou is die gort regtig gaar," sê hy vir mev. Weasley toe hy op 'n leunstoel voor die vuur neersak en sonder entoesiasme met sy ietwat uitgedroogde blomkool begin speel. "Rika Skinner het die hele week lank rondgesnuffel op soek na nog moleste by die Ministerie waaroor sy verslag kan doen. Nou het sy uitgevind van die arme ou Bertha wat verdwaal het, dus sal dit die hoofopskrif in môre se Profeet wees. Ek het vir Bagman gesê hy moes lankal iemand gestuur het om na haar te gaan soek."

"Mnr. Crouch sê dit al weke lank," sê Percy vinnig.

"Crouch kan sy sterre dank dat Rika niks oor Knipogies weet nie," sê mnr. Weasley geïrriteerd. "Daar is 'n goeie week se hoofopskrifte in hoe sy huiself daardie Donker Merk met 'n towerstaf opgetower het."

"Ek dag ons stem almal saam dat die elf, hoewel onverantwoordelik, nie die Donker Merk opgetower het nie," sê Percy ergerlik.

"As jy my vra, kan mnr. Crouch sy sterre dank dat niemand by die *Daaglikse Profeet* weet hoe gemeen hy teenoor elwe is nie!" sê Hermien vererger.

"Luister hier, Hermien!" sê Percy. "'n Amptenaar van die Ministerie in 'n hoë pos soos mnr. Crouch moet kan staatmaak op volkome gehoorsaamheid deur sy werknemers —"

"Sy slaaf, bedoel jy," sê Hermien en haar stem word skril. "Hy betaal Knipogies nie, of betaal hy haar?"

"Ek stel voor dat julle almal boontoe gaan en seker maak dat alles behoorlik gepak is," sê mev. Weasley en maak hiermee 'n einde aan die argument. "Toe nou, almal van julle . . ."

Harry pak sy Besemstok Versienstel weg, swaai sy Vuurslag oor sy skouer en gaan boontoe saam met Ron. Bo in die huis raas die reën nog harder, om nie te praat van die luide gefluit en gekerm van die wind en die sporadiese krete van die spook wat in die solder woon nie. Toe hulle instap, kwetter Pigwidgeon en fladder in sy kou rond. Dit lyk of die gesig van die halfgepakte trommels hom besonder vrolik laat voel.

"Gooi vir hom 'n paar Uilsnoepies," sê Ron en gooi die pakkie vir Harry, "dalk maak dit hom stil."

Harry druk 'n paar snoepies deur die tralies van Pigwidgeon se kou en keer dan terug na sy trommel. Hedwig se kou staan bo-op en dis nog steeds leeg.

"Dis al langer as 'n week," sê Harry terwyl hy na Hedwig se verlate dwarsstok kyk. "Ron, jy dink nie Sirius is gevang nie, of wat?"

"Nee, dit sal in die *Daaglikse Profeet* wees," sê Ron. "Die Ministerie sal wil wys dat hulle darem iemand kan vang, of wat sê jy?"

"Ja, is seker so . . ."

"Kyk, hier's die goed wat Ma vir jou in Diagonaalstraat gekoop het. En 'n vir jou goud uit jou kluis ook gehaal . . . en al jou sokkies gewas."

Hy sit 'n stapel pakkies op Harry se kampbed neer en laat val die geldsakkie en 'n stapel sokkies langsaan. Harry maak sy inkopies oop. Naas *Die Standaardhandleiding vir Goëlery, Graad 4*, deur Miranda Singvalk, is daar ook 'n hand vol nuwe veerpenne, 'n dosyn rolle perkament en hervulle vir sy towerdrankie-stel – sy leeuvisruggraat en nastergalessens is feitlik op. Hy is net besig om sy onderklere in sy hekseketel te pak toe Ron 'n uitroep van afgryse agter hom gee.

"Wat is dit miskien?"

Hy hou iets wat vir Harry soos 'n lang, maroen ferweelrok lyk in die lug. Dit het 'n ouderwetse kantvalletjie om die kraag en bypassende kant om die moue.

Iemand klop aan die deur en mev. Weasley kom binne met 'n arm vol pas gestrykte Hogwarts-klere.

"Hierso," sê sy terwyl sy dit in twee verdeel. "Sorg dat julle dit ordentlik inpak sodat dit nie kreukel nie."

"Ma het Ginny se nuwe rok by my goed gesit," sê Ron en gee dit vir haar aan.

"Natuurlik het ek nie," sê mev. Weasley. "Dis joune. Jou aandkleed."

"Wat?" sê Ron en hy lyk gewalg.

"Aandkleed!" herhaal mev. Weasley. "Dit staan op jou skoollys dat julle vanjaar elk 'n aandkleed moet hê . . . 'n kleed vir formele geleent-hede!"

“Ma maak seker ’n grappie,” sê Ron ongelowig. “Ek gaan nie daai ding dra nie, vergeet dit.”

“Almal dra dit, Ron!” sê mev. Weasley kwaai. “Hulle lyk almal so! Jou pa het ook een vir deftige funksies!”

“Ek loop eerder kaal voor ek dit aantrek,” sê Ron koppig.

“Moenie verspot wees nie,” sê mev. Weasley, “elkeen van julle moet ’n aandkleed hê, dis op jul lys! Ek het vir Harry ook een . . . wys vir hom, Harry . . .”

Harry maak die laaste pakkie op sy kampbed huiwerig oop. Dis egter nie so erg soos wat hy verwag het nie; sy aandkleed het geen kant op nie; om die waarheid te sê, dit lyk baie soos dié wat hy skool toe dra, behalwe dat dit bottelgroen pleks van swart is.

“Ek het gedink dit sal die kleur van jou oë beklemtoon, skat,” sê mev. Weasley goedaardig.

“Wel, daai een is heel oukei!” sê Ron vererg terwyl hy na Harry se aandkleed kyk. “Hoekom het ek nie ook so iets nie?”

“Omdat . . . wel, joune is tweedehands en daar was nie veel van ’n keuse nie,” sê mev. Weasley blosend.

Harry kyk weg. Hy is meer as bereid om al die geld in sy Edelhout-kuis met die Weasleys te deel, maar hy weet dat hulle dit nooit sal aanvaar nie.

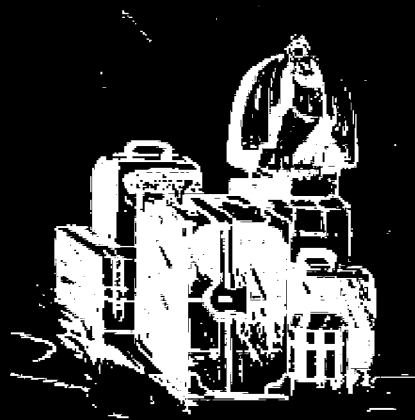
“Ek gaan dit nie dra nie,” hou Ron vol. “Nooit.”

“Goed,” sê mev. Weasley bitsig. “Loop kaal. En Harry, maak seker dat jy ’n foto van hom neem. Die vader weet, dit sal my glád nie kwaad doen om ’n slaggye lekker te lag nie.”

Sy stap by die kamer uit en slaan die deur agter haar toe. Van agter hulle hoor hulle ’n snaakse stikgeluid. Pigwidgeon het hom aan ’n oor-groot Uilsnoepie versluk.

“Hoekom is alles wat ek het gemors?” sê Ron woedend terwyl hy deur die kamer stap om die snoepie uit Pigwidgeon se snawel te haal.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



ABOARD THE HOGWARTS EXPRESS

There was a definite end-of-the-holidays gloom in the air when Harry awoke next morning. Heavy rain was still splattering against the window as he got dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt; they would change into their school robes on the Hogwarts Express.

He, Ron, Fred, and George had just reached the first-floor landing on their way down to breakfast, when Mrs. Weasley appeared at the foot of the stairs, looking harassed.

“Arthur!” she called up the staircase. “Arthur! Urgent message from the Ministry!”

Harry flattened himself against the wall as Mr. Weasley came clattering past with his robes on back-to-front and hurtled out of

sight. When Harry and the others entered the kitchen, they saw Mrs. Weasley rummaging anxiously in the drawers — “I’ve got a quill here somewhere!” — and Mr. Weasley bending over the fire, talking to —

Harry shut his eyes hard and opened them again to make sure that they were working properly.

Amos Diggory’s head was sitting in the middle of the flames like a large, bearded egg. It was talking very fast, completely unperturbed by the sparks flying around it and the flames licking its ears.

“. . . Muggle neighbors heard bangs and shouting, so they went and called those what-d’you-call-’ems — please-men. Arthur, you’ve got to get over there —”

“Here!” said Mrs. Weasley breathlessly, pushing a piece of parchment, a bottle of ink, and a crumpled quill into Mr. Weasley’s hands.

“— it’s a real stroke of luck I heard about it,” said Mr. Diggory’s head. “I had to come into the office early to send a couple of owls, and I found the Improper Use of Magic lot all setting off — if Rita Skeeter gets hold of this one, Arthur —”

“What does Mad-Eye say happened?” asked Mr. Weasley, unscrewing the ink bottle, loading up his quill, and preparing to take notes.

Mr. Diggory’s head rolled its eyes. “Says he heard an intruder in his yard. Says he was creeping toward the house, but was ambushed by his dustbins.”

“What did the dustbins do?” asked Mr. Weasley, scribbling frantically.

“Made one hell of a noise and fired rubbish everywhere, as far as I can tell,” said Mr. Diggory. “Apparently one of them was still rocketing around when the please-men turned up —”

Mr. Weasley groaned.

“And what about the intruder?”

“Arthur, you know Mad-Eye,” said Mr. Diggory’s head, rolling its eyes again. “Someone creeping into his yard in the dead of night? More likely there’s a very shell-shocked cat wandering around somewhere, covered in potato peelings. But if the Improper Use of Magic lot get their hands on Mad-Eye, he’s had it — think of his record — we’ve got to get him off on a minor charge, something in your department — what are exploding dustbins worth?”

“Might be a caution,” said Mr. Weasley, still writing very fast, his brow furrowed. “Mad-Eye didn’t use his wand? He didn’t actually attack anyone?”

“I’ll bet he leapt out of bed and started jinxing everything he could reach through the window,” said Mr. Diggory, “but they’ll have a job proving it, there aren’t any casualties.”

“All right, I’m off,” Mr. Weasley said, and he stuffed the parchment with his notes on it into his pocket and dashed out of the kitchen again.

Mr. Diggory’s head looked around at Mrs. Weasley.

“Sorry about this, Molly,” it said, more calmly, “bothering you so early and everything . . . but Arthur’s the only one who can get Mad-Eye off, and Mad-Eye’s supposed to be starting his new job today. Why he had to choose last night . . .”

“Never mind, Amos,” said Mrs. Weasley. “Sure you won’t have a

bit of toast or anything before you go?”

“Oh go on, then,” said Mr. Diggory.

Mrs. Weasley took a piece of buttered toast from a stack on the kitchen table, put it into the fire tongs, and transferred it into Mr. Diggory’s mouth.

“Fanks,” he said in a muffled voice, and then, with a small *pop*, vanished.

Harry could hear Mr. Weasley calling hurried good-byes to Bill, Charlie, Percy, and the girls. Within five minutes, he was back in the kitchen, his robes on the right way now, dragging a comb through his hair.

“I’d better hurry — you have a good term, boys,” said Mr. Weasley to Harry, Ron, and the twins, fastening a cloak over his shoulders and preparing to Disapparate. “Molly, are you going to be all right taking the kids to King’s Cross?”

“Of course I will,” she said. “You just look after Mad-Eye, we’ll be fine.”

As Mr. Weasley vanished, Bill and Charlie entered the kitchen.

“Did someone say Mad-Eye?” Bill asked. “What’s he been up to now?”

“He says someone tried to break into his house last night,” said Mrs. Weasley.

“Mad-Eye Moody?” said George thoughtfully, spreading marmalade on his toast. “Isn’t he that nutter —”

“Your father thinks very highly of Mad-Eye Moody,” said Mrs. Weasley sternly.

“Yeah, well, Dad collects plugs, doesn’t he?” said Fred quietly as

Mrs. Weasley left the room. “Birds of a feather . . .”

“Moody was a great wizard in his time,” said Bill.

“He’s an old friend of Dumbledore’s, isn’t he?” said Charlie.

“Dumbledore’s not what you’d call *normal*, though, is he?” said Fred. “I mean, I know he’s a genius and everything . . .”

“Who *is* Mad-Eye?” asked Harry.

“He’s retired, used to work at the Ministry,” said Charlie. “I met him once when Dad took me in to work with him. He was an Auror — one of the best . . . a Dark wizard catcher,” he added, seeing Harry’s blank look. “Half the cells in Azkaban are full because of him. He made himself loads of enemies, though . . . the families of people he caught, mainly . . . and I heard he’s been getting really paranoid in his old age. Doesn’t trust anyone anymore. Sees Dark wizards everywhere.”

Bill and Charlie decided to come and see everyone off at King’s Cross station, but Percy, apologizing most profusely, said that he really needed to get to work.

“I just can’t justify taking more time off at the moment,” he told them. “Mr. Crouch is really starting to rely on me.”

“Yeah, you know what, Percy?” said George seriously. “I reckon he’ll know your name soon.”

Mrs. Weasley had braved the telephone in the village post office to order three ordinary Muggle taxis to take them into London.

“Arthur tried to borrow Ministry cars for us,” Mrs. Weasley whispered to Harry as they stood in the rain-washed yard, watching the taxi drivers heaving six heavy Hogwarts trunks into their cars. “But there weren’t any to spare. . . . Oh dear, they don’t look happy,

do they?”

Harry didn't like to tell Mrs. Weasley that Muggle taxi drivers rarely transported overexcited owls, and Pigwidgeon was making an earsplitting racket. Nor did it help that a number of Filibuster's Fabulous Wet-Start, No-Heat Fireworks went off unexpectedly when Fred's trunk sprang open, causing the driver carrying it to yell with fright and pain as Crookshanks clawed his way up the man's leg.

The journey was uncomfortable, owing to the fact that they were jammed in the back of the taxis with their trunks. Crookshanks took quite a while to recover from the fireworks, and by the time they entered London, Harry, Ron, and Hermione were all severely scratched. They were very relieved to get out at King's Cross, even though the rain was coming down harder than ever, and they got soaked carrying their trunks across the busy road and into the station.

Harry was used to getting onto platform nine and three-quarters by now. It was a simple matter of walking straight through the apparently solid barrier dividing platforms nine and ten. The only tricky part was doing this in an unobtrusive way, so as to avoid attracting Muggle attention. They did it in groups today; Harry, Ron, and Hermione (the most conspicuous, since they were accompanied by Pigwidgeon and Crookshanks) went first; they leaned casually against the barrier, chatting unconcernedly, and slid sideways through it . . . and as they did so, platform nine and three-quarters materialized in front of them.

The Hogwarts Express, a gleaming scarlet steam engine, was already there, clouds of steam billowing from it, through which the many Hogwarts students and parents on the platform appeared like

dark ghosts. Pigwidgeon became noisier than ever in response to the hooting of many owls through the mist. Harry, Ron, and Hermione set off to find seats, and were soon stowing their luggage in a compartment halfway along the train. They then hopped back down onto the platform to say good-bye to Mrs. Weasley, Bill, and Charlie.

“I might be seeing you all sooner than you think,” said Charlie, grinning, as he hugged Ginny good-bye.

“Why?” said Fred keenly.

“You’ll see,” said Charlie. “Just don’t tell Percy I mentioned it . . . it’s ‘classified information, until such time as the Ministry sees fit to release it,’ after all.”

“Yeah, I sort of wish I were back at Hogwarts this year,” said Bill, hands in his pockets, looking almost wistfully at the train.

“*Why?*” said George impatiently.

“You’re going to have an interesting year,” said Bill, his eyes twinkling. “I might even get time off to come and watch a bit of it . . .”

“A bit of *what?*” said Ron.

But at that moment, the whistle blew, and Mrs. Weasley chivvied them toward the train doors.

“Thanks for having us to stay, Mrs. Weasley,” said Hermione as they climbed on board, closed the door, and leaned out of the window to talk to her.

“Yeah, thanks for everything, Mrs. Weasley,” said Harry.

“Oh it was my pleasure, dears,” said Mrs. Weasley. “I’d invite you for Christmas, but . . . well, I expect you’re all going to want to stay at Hogwarts, what with . . . one thing and another.”

“Mum!” said Ron irritably. “What d’you three know that we don’t?”

“You’ll find out this evening, I expect,” said Mrs. Weasley, smiling. “It’s going to be very exciting — mind you, I’m very glad they’ve changed the rules —”

“What rules?” said Harry, Ron, Fred, and George together.

“I’m sure Professor Dumbledore will tell you. . . . Now, behave, won’t you? *Won’t* you, Fred? And you, George?”

The pistons hissed loudly and the train began to move.

“Tell us what’s happening at Hogwarts!” Fred bellowed out of the window as Mrs. Weasley, Bill, and Charlie sped away from them. “What rules are they changing?”

But Mrs. Weasley only smiled and waved. Before the train had rounded the corner, she, Bill, and Charlie had Disappeared.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione went back to their compartment. The thick rain splattering the windows made it very difficult to see out of them. Ron undid his trunk, pulled out his maroon dress robes, and flung them over Pigwidgeon’s cage to muffle his hooting.

“Bagman wanted to tell us what’s happening at Hogwarts,” he said grumpily, sitting down next to Harry. “At the World Cup, remember? But my own mother won’t say. Wonder what —”

“Shh!” Hermione whispered suddenly, pressing her finger to her lips and pointing toward the compartment next to theirs. Harry and Ron listened, and heard a familiar drawling voice drifting in through the open door.

“. . . Father actually considered sending me to Durmstrang rather than Hogwarts, you know. He knows the headmaster, you see. Well,

you know his opinion of Dumbledore — the man's such a Mudblood-lover — and Durmstrang doesn't admit that sort of riffraff. But Mother didn't like the idea of me going to school so far away. Father says Durmstrang takes a far more sensible line than Hogwarts about the Dark Arts. Durmstrang students actually *learn* them, not just the defense rubbish we do. . . .”

Hermione got up, tiptoed to the compartment door, and slid it shut, blocking out Malfoy's voice.

“So he thinks Durmstrang would have suited him, does he?” she said angrily. “I wish he *had* gone, then we wouldn't have to put up with him.”

“Durmstrang's another Wizarding school?” said Harry.

“Yes,” said Hermione sniffily, “and it's got a horrible reputation. According to *An Appraisal of Magical Education in Europe*, it puts a lot of emphasis on the Dark Arts.”

“I think I've heard of it,” said Ron vaguely. “Where is it? What country?”

“Well, nobody knows, do they?” said Hermione, raising her eyebrows.

“Er — why not?” said Harry.

“There's traditionally been a lot of rivalry between all the magic schools. Durmstrang and Beauxbatons like to conceal their whereabouts so nobody can steal their secrets,” said Hermione matter-of-factly.

“Come off it,” said Ron, starting to laugh. “Durmstrang's got to be about the same size as Hogwarts — how are you going to hide a great big castle?”

“But Hogwarts *is* hidden,” said Hermione, in surprise. “Everyone knows that . . . well, everyone who’s read *Hogwarts: A History*, anyway.”

“Just you, then,” said Ron. “So go on — how d’you hide a place like Hogwarts?”

“It’s bewitched,” said Hermione. “If a Muggle looks at it, all they see is a moldering old ruin with a sign over the entrance saying DANGER, DO NOT ENTER, UNSAFE.”

“So Durmstrang’ll just look like a ruin to an outsider too?”

“Maybe,” said Hermione, shrugging, “or it might have Muggle-repelling charms on it, like the World Cup stadium. And to keep foreign wizards from finding it, they’ll have made it Unplottable —”

“Come again?”

“Well, you can enchant a building so it’s impossible to plot on a map, can’t you?”

“Er . . . if you say so,” said Harry.

“But I think Durmstrang must be somewhere in the far north,” said Hermione thoughtfully. “Somewhere very cold, because they’ve got fur capes as part of their uniforms.”

“Ah, think of the possibilities,” said Ron dreamily. “It would’ve been so easy to push Malfoy off a glacier and make it look like an accident. . . . Shame his mother likes him. . . .”

The rain became heavier and heavier as the train moved farther north. The sky was so dark and the windows so steamy that the lanterns were lit by midday. The lunch trolley came rattling along the corridor, and Harry bought a large stack of Cauldron Cakes for them to share.

Several of their friends looked in on them as the afternoon progressed, including Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas, and Neville Longbottom, a round-faced, extremely forgetful boy who had been brought up by his formidable witch of a grandmother. Seamus was still wearing his Ireland rosette. Some of its magic seemed to be wearing off now; it was still squeaking “*Troy — Mullet — Moran!*” but in a very feeble and exhausted sort of way. After half an hour or so, Hermione, growing tired of the endless Quidditch talk, buried herself once more in *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4*, and started trying to learn a Summoning Charm.

Neville listened jealously to the others’ conversation as they relived the Cup match.

“Gran didn’t want to go,” he said miserably. “Wouldn’t buy tickets. It sounded amazing though.”

“It was,” said Ron. “Look at this, Neville. . . .”

He rummaged in his trunk up in the luggage rack and pulled out the miniature figure of Viktor Krum.

“Oh *wow*,” said Neville enviously as Ron tipped Krum onto his pudgy hand.

“We saw him right up close, as well,” said Ron. “We were in the Top Box —”

“For the first and last time in your life, Weasley.”

Draco Malfoy had appeared in the doorway. Behind him stood Crabbe and Goyle, his enormous, thuggish cronies, both of whom appeared to have grown at least a foot during the summer. Evidently they had overheard the conversation through the compartment door, which Dean and Seamus had left ajar.

“Don’t remember asking you to join us, Malfoy,” said Harry coolly.

“Weasley . . . what is *that*?” said Malfoy, pointing at Pigwidgeon’s cage. A sleeve of Ron’s dress robes was dangling from it, swaying with the motion of the train, the moldy lace cuff very obvious.

Ron made to stuff the robes out of sight, but Malfoy was too quick for him; he seized the sleeve and pulled.

“Look at this!” said Malfoy in ecstasy, holding up Ron’s robes and showing Crabbe and Goyle, “Weasley, you weren’t thinking of *wearing* these, were you? I mean — they were very fashionable in about 1890. . . .”

“Eat dung, Malfoy!” said Ron, the same color as the dress robes as he snatched them back out of Malfoy’s grip. Malfoy howled with derisive laughter; Crabbe and Goyle guffawed stupidly.

“So . . . going to enter, Weasley? Going to try and bring a bit of glory to the family name? There’s money involved as well, you know . . . you’d be able to afford some decent robes if you won. . . .”

“What are you talking about?” snapped Ron.

“*Are you going to enter?*” Malfoy repeated. “I suppose *you* will, Potter? You never miss a chance to show off, do you?”

“Either explain what you’re on about or go away, Malfoy,” said Hermione testily, over the top of *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4*.

A gleeful smile spread across Malfoy’s pale face.

“Don’t tell me you don’t *know*?” he said delightedly. “You’ve got a father and brother at the Ministry and you don’t even *know*? My God, *my* father told me about it ages ago . . . heard it from Cornelius

Fudge. But then, Father's always associated with the top people at the Ministry. . . . Maybe your father's too junior to know about it, Weasley . . . yes . . . they probably don't talk about important stuff in front of him . . .”

Laughing once more, Malfoy beckoned to Crabbe and Goyle, and the three of them disappeared.

Ron got to his feet and slammed the sliding compartment door so hard behind them that the glass shattered.

“*Ron!*” said Hermione reproachfully, and she pulled out her wand, muttered “*Reparo!*” and the glass shards flew back into a single pane and back into the door.

“Well . . . making it look like he knows everything and we don't. . . .” Ron snarled. “‘*Father's always associated with the top people at the Ministry.*’ . . . Dad could've got a promotion any time . . . he just likes it where he is. . . .”

“Of course he does,” said Hermione quietly. “Don't let Malfoy get to you, Ron —”

“Him! Get to me!? As if!” said Ron, picking up one of the remaining Cauldron Cakes and squashing it into a pulp.

Ron's bad mood continued for the rest of the journey. He didn't talk much as they changed into their school robes, and was still glowering when the Hogwarts Express slowed down at last and finally stopped in the pitch-darkness of Hogsmeade station.

As the train doors opened, there was a rumble of thunder overhead. Hermione bundled up Crookshanks in her cloak and Ron left his dress robes over Pigwidgeon as they left the train, heads bent and eyes narrowed against the downpour. The rain was now coming

down so thick and fast that it was as though buckets of ice-cold water were being emptied repeatedly over their heads.

“Hi, Hagrid!” Harry yelled, seeing a gigantic silhouette at the far end of the platform.

“All righ’, Harry?” Hagrid bellowed back, waving. “See yeh at the feast if we don’ drown!”

First years traditionally reached Hogwarts Castle by sailing across the lake with Hagrid.

“Oooh, I wouldn’t fancy crossing the lake in this weather,” said Hermione fervently, shivering as they inched slowly along the dark platform with the rest of the crowd. A hundred horseless carriages stood waiting for them outside the station. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville climbed gratefully into one of them, the door shut with a snap, and a few moments later, with a great lurch, the long procession of carriages was rumbling and splashing its way up the track toward Hogwarts Castle.

Aan Boord van die Hogwarts Express

Daar is 'n besliste einde-van-die-vakansie somberte in die lug toe Harry die volgende oggend wakker word. Swaar reëns spat nog steeds teen die venster toe hy sy jeans en 'n T-hemp aantrek; hulle trek hul skoolklere oers op die Hogwarts Express aan.

Hy, Ron, Fred en George is net mooi op die onderste trapportaal op pad kombuis toe vir ontbyt toe mev. Weasley, wat erg beswaard lyk, aan die voet van die trappe verskyn.

“Arthur!” roep sy op teen die trappe. “Arthur! Dringende boodskap van die Ministerie!”

Harry smeer homself plat teen die muur toe mnr. Weasley, wat sy kleed verkeerd om aanhet, klaterend verbykom en om die hoek verdwyn. Toe Harry en die ander in die kombuis kom, sien hulle hoe mev. Weasley angstig in die kombuiskas se laaie krap – “Hier was 'n veerpen hier iewers!” – terwyl mnr. Weasley gebukkend oor die vuur staan en praat met

—
Harry knyp sy oë styf toe en maak hulle dan weer oop om seker te maak dat hulle behoorlik werk.

Amos Diggory se kop sit in die middel van die vlamme soos 'n groot eier met 'n baard. Dit praat baie vinnig, sonder om dit hoegenaamd aan die vonke wat oral rondvlieg en die vlamme wat aan sy ore lek, te steur.

“... die Moggels langsaan het vreeslike knalle en 'n geskree gehoor, dus het hulle daardie wat-noem-jy-hulle-nou-weer – rondawels ontbied. Arthur, jy moet net eenvoudig kom —”

“Hier!” sê mev. Weasley uitasem en druk 'n stuk perkament, 'n bottel ink en 'n geknakte veerpen in mnr. Weasley se hande.

“— 'n blote geluiskoot dat ek daarvan gehoor het,” sê mnr. Diggory se kop. “Ek moes vroeg kantoor toe gaan om 'n paar uile te stuur en toe is die spul van die Onbehoorlike Gebruik van Towerkuns juis almal op pad. As Rika Skinner hiervan moet hoor, Arthur —”

“Wat het Maloog gesê het gebeur?” vra mnr. Weasley terwyl hy die inkbottel oopskroef, sy veerpen vol trek en aantekeninge begin maak.

Mnr. Diggory rol sy oë. "Hy't gesê hy't 'n indringer op sy werf gehoor. Gesê hulle het na sy huis gesluip, maar dat sy vullisdromme hulle voor-gelê het."

"Wat het die vullisdromme nogal gedoen?" vra mnr. Weasley terwyl hy verbete skryf.

"'n Verskriklike kabaal gemaak en vullis die wêreld vol geskiet, klink dit vir my," sê mnr. Diggory. "Blykbaar het een van die dromme nog staan en skiet toe die klomp rondawels daar aangekom het."

Mnr. Weasley kreun. "En wat van die indringer?"

"Arthur, jy ken vir Maloog," sê mnr. Diggory se kop en hy rol weer sy oë. "Iemand wat in die middel van die nag na sy werf gesluip het? Dit was baie meer waarskynlik 'n erg geskokte kat wat nou, vol aartappelskille, iewers rondsluip. Maar as die spul van die Onbehoorlike Gebruik van To-werkuns vir Maloog in die hande moet kry, is dit nag vir hom – dink aan sy rekord – ons moet hom eenvoudig op 'n kleiner klag loskry, iets in jou departement – wat sal hy kry vir iets soos ontploffende vullisdromme?"

"Dalk 'n waarskuwing," sê 'n fronsende mnr. Weasley wat nog steeds vinnig skryf. "Maloo het nie sy towerstaf gebruik nie, het hy? Hy het niemand werklik aangeval nie?"

"Ek wed hy't uit die bed gespring en alles wat hy deur die venster kon bykom, begin toor," sê mnr. Diggory, "maar hulle sal sukkel om dit te be-wys, daar is geen ongevalle nie."

"Goed, ek is weg," sê mnr. Weasley terwyl hy die perkament met die notas in sy sak druk en by die kombuis uitdraf.

Mnr. Diggory se kop kyk rond op soek na mev. Weasley.

"Jammer, Molly," sê hy nou meer bedaard, "dat ek jou so vroeg in die oggend pla en alles . . . maar Arthur is die enigste een wat vir Maloog kan loskry en Maloog is veronderstel om vandag met 'n nuwe werk te begin. Hoekom hy nou juis laas nag moes kies om . . ."

"Dis alles reg, Amos," sê mev. Weasley. "Is jy seker jy wil nie 'n stukkie roosterbrood of iets hê voor jy gaan nie?"

"H'm, nou maar goed," sê mnr. Diggory.

Mev. Weasley tel 'n sny gebotterde roosterbrood van 'n stapel op die kombuistafel af op, vat dit met die vuurtang vas en steek dit in mnr. Dig-gory se mond.

"Dankie," mompel hy en toe, met 'n klein plofgeluid, is hy weg.

Harry hoor hoe mnr. Weasley vir Bill, Charlie, Percy en die meisies ge-jaagd groet. Vyf minute later is hy terug in die kombuis, sy kleed is nou reg om en hy is besig om 'n kam deur sy hare te trek.

"Ek moet weg wees – julle moet 'n lekker kwartaal hê, seuns," sê mnr. Weasley vir Harry, Ron en die tweeling, voor hy 'n mantel om sy skouers gooi en regmaak om te disappareer. "Molly, sien jy kans om die kinders alleen King's Cross toe te neem?"

“Natuurlik,” sê sy. “Sorg jy maar vir Maloog, ons sal regkom.”

Net toe mnr. Weasley verdwyn, kom Bill en Charlie die kombuis binne.

“Het iemand Maloog gesê?” vra Bill. “Wat het hy nou al weer aangevang?”

“Hy sê iemand het laas nag by sy huis probeer inbreek,” sê mev. Weasley.

“Maloog Moodie?” sê George ingedagte terwyl hy marmelade op sy roosterbrood smeer. “Is hy nie daardie getikte ou kêrel wat –”

“Jou pa dink baie van Maloog Moodie,” sê mev. Weasley streng.

“Ja, wel, Pa maak ook kragproppe bymekaar, of hoe?” sê Fred onderlangs toe mev. Weasley die kamer verlaat het. “Voëls van eenderse ver . . .”

“Moodie was op sy dag ’n groot towenaar,” sê Bill.

“Hy’s ’n ou vriend van Dompeldorius, dan nie?” sê Charlie.

“Dompeldorius is ook nie heeltemal wat jy normaal sal noem nie, is hy?” sê Fred. “Ek bedoel, ek weet hy’s ’n genie en alles . . .”

“Wie is Maloog?” vra Harry.

“Hy’t afgetree, het by die Ministerie gewerk,” sê Charlie. “Ek het hom eers ontmoet toe Pa my saam met hom werk toe geneem het. Hy was ’n Auror – een van die bestes . . . iemand wat Donker towenaars vang,” voeg hy by toe hy die verblufte uitdrukking op Harry se gesig sien. “Goed die helfte van die selle in Azkaban is vol as gevolg van hom. Hy’t egter tonne vyande gemaak . . . hoofsaaklik die families van die mense wat hy gevang het . . . en ek hoor hy raak erg paranoïes noudat hy ouer word. Vertrou niemand nie. Sien oral Donker towenaars.”

Bill en Charlie besluit om saam te gaan om almal op King’s Cross-stasie af te sien, maar Percy maak oor en oor verskoning en sê dat hy regtig by die werk moet kom.

“Ek kan dit net nie regverdig om nou nog tyd af te neem nie,” sê hy vir hulle. “Mnr. Crouch begin werklik swaar op my steun.”

“Ja, en weet jy wat, Percy?” sê George ernstig. “Ek is seker hy sal binnkort weet wat jou van is.”

Mev. Weasley het dit gewaag om die telefoon in die dorp se poskantoor te gebruik om drie gewone Moggeltaxi’s te bestel om hulle Londen toe te neem.

“Arthur het probeer om vir ons motors by die Ministerie te leen,” fluister mev. Weasley vir Harry toe hulle op die natgereënde werf staan en kyk hoe die taxibestuurders ses swaar Hogwarts-trommels in hul motors laai. “Daar was egter niks om te spaar nie . . . O, liewe, hulle lyk nie baie in hul skik nie, of hoe?”

Harry sien nie kans om vir mev. Weasley te sê dat Moggeltaxibestuurders nie gewoonlik oorgestimuleerde uile vervoer nie en Pigwidgeon is

juis besig om 'n oorverdoende kabaal te maak. Dit help ook nie toe Fred se trommel oopspring en 'n paar van Dr. Vrijbouter se Ongelooflike Nat-en-Droë Vuurwerke onverwags afgaan sodat Kromskeen beangs teen die drywer se been opklouter en die drywer skrik en hard skree nie.

Die reis is ongemaklik, aangesien hulle trommels en al ingedruk agter-in die taxi's moet sit. Dit neem 'n hele ruk voor Kromskeen van die vuurwerke herstel het en teen die tyd dat hulle by Londen aankom, is Harry, Ron en Hermien erg gekrap. Hulle is baie verlig toe hulle by King's Cross uitklim, al word hulle ook papnat toe hulle hul trommels oor die besige straat na die stasie moet dra.

Teen hierdie tyd is Harry gewoonnd daaraan om by platform nege-en-'n-driekwart op te klim. Dit is baie eenvoudig. 'n Mens moet bloot dwarsdeur die versperring tussen platforms nege en tien, wat op die oog af so-lied is, loop. Die moeilikste deel is om dit onopsigtelik te doen sodat die Moggels niks merk nie. Vandag doen hulle dit in groepe; Harry, Ron en Hermien (die mees opvallende groep omdat Pigwidgeon en Kromskeen by hulle is) gaan eerste; hulle leun ongeërg teen die versperring terwyl hulle sorgeloos gesels en gly dan bloot sywaarts daardeur . . . en sodra dit gebeur het, doem platform nege-en-'n-driekwart voor hulle op.

Die Hogwarts Express, 'n glansende skarlakenrooi stoomtrein, is reeds daar. Wolke stoom warrel daaruit sodat die Hogwarts-studente en -ouers op die perron soos donker spoke daardeur lyk. Pigwidgeon raas nog harder as tevore in reaksie op die gehoe-hoe van al die uile in die rook. Harry, Ron en Hermien sit af om sitplekke te kry en is spoedig besig om hul bagasie in 'n kompartement iewers in die middel van die trein weg te pak. Daarna spring hulle terug op die perron om mev. Weasley, Bill en Charlie te gaan groet.

"Ek sien julle dalk gouer as wat julle verwag," sê Charlie grinnikend toe hy vir Ginny omhels.

"Hoekom?" vra Fred dadelik.

"Jy sal sien," sê Charlie. "Moet tog net nie vir Percy sê dat ek dit genoem het nie . . . dit is na alles 'geklassifiseerde inligting tot tyd en wyl die Ministerie besluit om dit vry te stel'."

"Ek moet sê, ek wens so half ek was hierdie jaar terug op Hogwarts," sê Bill terwyl hy met sy hande diep in sy sakke verlangend na die trein staar.

"Hoekom?" vra George ongeduldig.

"Julle gaan 'n interessante jaar hê," sê Bill en sy oë vonkel. "Ek mag dalk selfs tyd afkry om 'n bietjie te kom kyk . . ."

"'n Bietjie van wat?" vra Ron.

Op daardie oomblik blaas die fluitjie egter en mev. Weasley jaag hulle aan na die trein se deure toe.

"Dankie dat ons kon kom kuier het, mev. Weasley," sê Hermien nadat

hulle aan boord geklim en die deur toegemaak het. Hulle leun deur die venster om met haar te praat.

"Ja, dankie vir alles, mev. Weasley," sê Harry.

"Ag, dit was my plesier, kinders," sê mev. Weasley. "Ek sou julle graag vir Kersfees wou oornooi, maar . . . Wel, ek reken julle sal seker eerder by Hogwarts wil bly siende dat . . . in die lig van . . ."

"Ma!" sê Ron ergerlik. "Wat weet julle drie wat ons nie weet nie?"

"Julle sal wel vanaand uitvind, sou ek sê," sê mev. Weasley glimlaggend. "Dit gaan baie opwindend wees – maar ek moet sê, ek is bly hulle het die reëls verander –"

"Watter reëls?" sê Harry, Ron, Fred en George gelyk.

"Ek is seker professor Dompeldorius sal vir julle sê . . . nou toe, gedra julle, nè. Nè, Fred? En jy ook, George!"

Die suiers sis luid en die trein begin beweeg.

"Sê gou wat by Hogwarts gaan gebeur!" bulder Fred deur die venster terwyl mev. Weasley, Bill en Charlie teen 'n toenemende spoed wegraak. "Watter reëls het hulle verander?"

Mev. Weasley glimlag egter net en waai. Nog voor die trein om die hoek is, het sy, Bill en Charlie reeds gedisappareer.

Harry, Ron en Hermien gaan terug na hul kompartement toe. Die waar reëns wat teen die vensters spat, maak dit baie moeilik om buite toe te kan sien. Ron maak sy trommel oop, haal sy maroen aandkleed uit en gooi dit oor Pigwidgeon se kou om sy gehoe-hoe te demp.

"Bagman wou vir ons sê wat by Hogwarts gaan gebeur," sê hy grimmig toe hy langs Harry gaan sit. "By die Wêreldbeker, onthou jy? Maar my eie ma wil niks sê nie. Wonder wat –"

"Sjj!" fluister Hermien skielik. Sy druk haar vingers teen haar lippe en beduie na die kompartement reg langs hulle s'n. Harry en Ron luister en hoor 'n bekende, dralende stem wat deur die oop deur kom.

". . . Vader het dit inderwaarheid oorweeg om my na Durmstrang eerder as na Hogwarts te stuur, weet julle. Hy ken die skoolhoof, julle sien. Wel, julle weet wat hy van Dompeldorius dink – die man is behep met Modderbloeders – en Durmstrang laat daardie soort gespuis glad nie daar toe nie. Dis net dat Moeder nie van die idee gehou het om my so ver weg te stuur nie. Vader sê Durmstrang is baie meer verstandig wanneer dit by die Donker Kunste kom as Hogwarts. Die studente by Durmstrang leer dit doen en nie net die verdedigings-gemors wat ons doen nie . . ."

Hermien staan op, loop op haar tone na die kompartement se deur en skuif dit toe sodat Malfoy se stem gedooft is.

"So, hy dink dat Durmstrang hom sou gepas het, nè?" sê sy vies. "Ek wens hy het gegaan, dan het ons nie met hom gesit nie."

"Durmstrang is nog 'n towerskool?" sê Harry.

"H'm," sê Hermien neusoptrekkerig, "en dit het 'n vieslike reputasie."

Volgens 'n Evaluering van Magiese Onderwys in Europa lê dit sterk klem op die Donker Kunste."

"Ek dink ek het al daarvan gehoor," sê Ron aarselend. "Waar is dit nou weer? Watter land?"

"Wel, niemand weet nie, of hoe?" sê Hermien terwyl sy haar wenkbroue lig.

"H'm – hoekom nie?" vra Harry.

"Tradisioneel is daar baie wedywing tussende towerskole. Durmstrang en Beauxbatons verkies om hul ligging te verbloem sodat niemand hul geheime kan steel nie," sê Hermien saaklik.

"Baie snaaks," sê Ron, wat begin lag het. "Durmstrang moet ten minste so groot soos Hogwarts wees, hoe kan hulle 'n yslike groot kasteel wil wegsteek?"

"Maar Hogwarts is weggesteek," sê Hermien verbaas, "almal weet dit . . . wel, almal wat *Hogwarts: 'n Oorsig* gelees het."

"Dan's dit net jy," sê Ron. "Goed, gaan voort – hoe steek 'n mens 'n plek soos Hogwarts weg?"

"Dis betower," sê Hermien. "As Moggels daarna kyk, is al wat hulle sou sien 'n bouvallige ou ruïne met 'n teken oor die ingang waarop GEVAAR, INGANG VERBODE, ONVEILIG, staan."

"So dan lyk Durmstrang ook net soos 'n ou bouval vir buitstanders?"

"Miskien," sê Hermien en haal haar skouers op, "of dalk is daar Moggelafweer-towerkunsies op soos met die stadion vir die Wêreldbeker. En om te keer dat vreemde towenaars dit kry, het hulle dit onkarterbaar gemaak."

"Wat?"

"Wel, 'n mens kan 'n gebou so betower dat dit onmoontlik is om dit op 'n kaart te sit, sien."

"H'm . . . as jy so sê," sê Harry.

"Maar ek dink Durmstrang is iewers in die verre noorde," sê Hermien peinsend. "Iewers waar dit baie koud is, want hulle dra pelsskouerman-tels as deel van hul uniforms."

"Aaa, dink net aan die moontlikhede," sê Ron dromerig. "Dit sal so maklik wees om vir Malfoy oor 'n gletser te stoot en dit soos 'n ongeluk te laat lyk . . . jammer dat sy ma van hom hou . . ."

Dit reën al swaarder en swaarder hoe verder noord die trein beweeg. Die lug is so donker en die vensters so toegewasem dat die lanterns al teen die middag aangesteek word. Die middagetetrollie kom ratelend in die gang af en Harry koop 'n groot stapel heksetelkoekies vir hulle almal om te deel.

Soos die middag aanstap, kom loer verskeie van hul vriende by hulle in, ook Septimus Floris, Dean Thomas en Neville Loggerenberg, 'n ron-

de gesigseun wat uiters vergeetagtig is en deur sy formidabele heks van 'n ouma grootgemaak word. Septimus dra nog steeds sy Ierse roset. Die towerkrag is egter iewat uitgewerk; dit piep nog "Lynch! Mullet! Moran!", maar op 'n moeë, flou manier. Omtrent 'n halfuur later is Hermien uitgekuier met die eindelose Kwiddiek-praatjies. Sy begrawe haarself weer eens in *Die Standaardhandleiding vir Goëlery, Graad 4* en begin om 'n Kombier-towerspreuk te leer.

Neville luister jaloers na die ander se gesprek waarin hulle die Wêreld-bekerwedstryd herleef.

"My ouma wou nie gaan nie," sê hy mistroostig. "Wou nie kaartjies koop nie. Maar dit klink of dit wonderlik was."

"Dit was," sê Ron. "Kyk hier, Neville . . ."

Hy vroetel in sy trommel op die bagasierak en haal die miniatuur-figuurtjie van Krum daaruit.

"O, sjoe," sê Neville begerig toe Ron vir Krum in sy pofferhand sit.

"Ons het hom van naby gesien," sê Ron. "Ons was in die boonste losie –"

"Vir die eerste en laaste keer in jou lewe, Weasley."

Draco Malfoy het in die deur verskyn. Agter hom staan Krabbe en Goliat, sy enorme, boefagtige makkers wat albei lyk asof hulle tydens die vakansie ten minste 'n halwe meter gegroei het. Dis duidelik dat hulle die gesprek deur die kompartement se deur wat Dean en Septimus oopgelos het, gehoor het.

"Ek kan nie onthou dat ons jou genooi het nie, Malfoy," sê Harry koeltjies.

"Weasley . . . wat is dit?" sê Malfoy en wys na Pigwidgeon se kou. Een van Ron se aandkleed se moue hang uit en swaai saam met die beweging van die trein sodat die ouderwetse kant op die mou duidelik sigbaar is.

Ron probeer om die aandkleed iewers weg te bondel, maar Malfoy is te vinnig vir hom; hy gryp die mou en pluk.

"Kyk hier!" sê Malfoy ekstaties toe hy Ron se aandkleed in die lug hou om vir Krabbe en Goliat te wys. "Weasley, jy's darem seker nie van plan om dit te dra nie, of wat? Ek bedoel – dit was seker hier rondom 1890 vreeslik in die mode . . ."

"Loop eet mis, Malfoy!" sê Ron wat nou dieselfde kleur as die aandkleed is en ruk dit uit Malfoy se greep. Malfoy skree van die lag en Krabbe en Goliat grynsag op hul onnosel manier.

"So . . . jy gaan dus deelneem, Weasley? Jy gaan probeer om die familienaam te vereer? Daar's geld op die spel, weet jy . . . jy sal 'n ordentlike kleed kan bekostig as jy wen . . ."

"Waarvan praat jy?" snou Ron hom toe.

"Gaan jy deelneem?" herhaal Malfoy. "Jy sal seker, Potter? Jy mis mos nooit 'n kans om te wys hoe goed jy kamma is nie, h'm?"

“Jy moet óf sê wat jy bedoel, óf trap, Malfoy,” sê Hermien knorrig oor die bokant van *Die Standaardhandleiding vir Goëlerly, Graad 4*.

’n Vermakerige glimlaggie sprei oor Malfoy se bleek gesig.

“Moenie vir my sê dat julle nie weet nie?” sê hy verheug. “Jy het ’n pa en ’n broer by die Ministerie en jy weet nie eens nie? Genade, my pa het al eeue gelede vir my gesê . . . het dit by Cornelius Broddelwerk gehoor. Maar dan, Vader beweeg nog altyd tussen die topmense by die Ministerie . . . miskien is jou pa te junior om te weet, Weasley . . . ja . . . hulle praat seker nie oor belangrike goed voor hom nie . . .”

Terwyl hy weer luidkeels lag, wink Malfoy vir Krabbe en Goliat en die drie van hulle gee pad.

Ron staan op en stamp die skuifdeur voor die kompartement so hard toe dat die glas aan flenters breek.

“Ron!” sê Hermien verwytend terwyl sy haar towerstaf uithaal en “*Reparo!*” mompel sodat die glasskerwe in ’n enkele paneel saamvlieg en toe weer in die deur gaan sit.

“Moet ook altyd maak asof hy alles weet en ons nie . . .” grom Ron. “Vader beweeg nog altyd tussen die topmense by die Ministerie . . . Pa kan bevordering kry net wanneer hy wil . . . dis net dat hy hou van wat hy doen . . .”

“Natuurlik,” sê Hermien kalm. “Moenie dat Malfoy jou omkrap nie, Ron –”

“Hy! My omkrap! Asof hy dit nogal kan regkry!” sê Ron terwyl hy een van die hekseketelkoekies optel en dit flenters druk.

Vir die res van die rit is Ron in ’n slegte bui. Toe hulle hul skoolklere aantrek, praat hy amper niks en hy is nog steeds omgekrap toe die Hogwarts Express begin spoed verloor en uiteindelik in die pikdonkerte op die Hogsmeade-stasie stilhou.

Toe die trein se deur oopgaan, is daar ’n gerammel van donderweer bo hulle. Hermien vou vir Kromskeen in haar mantel toe en Ron los sy aandkleed oor Pigwidgeon se kou toe hulle, met hul koppe vooroor gebuig en hul oë toegeknyp teen die reën, van die trein afklim. Dit reën nou so kwaai dat dit voel asof emmers vol yskoue water oor hul koppe gegooi word.

“Haai, Hagrid!” gil Harry toe hy ’n reusagtige silhoeët aan die verste kant van die perron sien staan.

“Is alles reg, Harry?” bulder Hagrid terug en waai. “Sien julle by die fees as ons nie verdrink nie!”

Tradisioneel bereik die eerstejaars die kasteel deur saam met Hagrid oor die meer te seil.

“Oe, ek sal niks daarvan hou om in hierdie weer op die meer te gaan nie,” sê Hermien beslis toe hulle bibberend en voetjie vir voetjie oor die donker perron saam met die res van die mense aanskuifel. ’n Honderd

kortse sonder perde staan buite die stasie op hulle en wag. Harry, Ron, Hermien en Neville klouter dankbaar in een, die deur klap toe en 'n paar oomblikke later trek hulle met 'n wilde sprong weg en beweeg ratelend en plassend met die pad langs na die Hogwarts-kasteel toe.

CHAPTER TWELVE



THE TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT

Through the gates, flanked with statues of winged boars, and up the sweeping drive the carriages trundled, swaying dangerously in what was fast becoming a gale. Leaning against the window, Harry could see Hogwarts coming nearer, its many lighted windows blurred and shimmering behind the thick curtain of rain. Lightning flashed across the sky as their carriage came to a halt before the great oak front doors, which stood at the top of a flight of stone steps. People who had occupied the carriages in front were already hurrying up the stone steps into the castle. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville jumped down from their carriage and dashed up the steps too, looking up only when they were safely inside the cavernous, torch-lit entrance hall, with its magnificent marble staircase.

“Blimey,” said Ron, shaking his head and sending water everywhere, “if that keeps up the lake’s going to overflow. I’m soak — ARRGH!”

A large, red, water-filled balloon had dropped from out of the ceiling onto Ron’s head and exploded. Drenched and sputtering, Ron staggered sideways into Harry, just as a second water bomb dropped — narrowly missing Hermione, it burst at Harry’s feet, sending a wave of cold water over his sneakers into his socks. People all around them shrieked and started pushing one another in their efforts to get out of the line of fire. Harry looked up and saw, floating twenty feet above them, Peeves the Poltergeist, a little man in a bell-covered hat and orange bow tie, his wide, malicious face contorted with concentration as he took aim again.

“PEEVES!” yelled an angry voice. “Peeves, come down here at ONCE!”

Professor McGonagall, deputy headmistress and Head of Gryffindor House, had come dashing out of the Great Hall; she skidded on the wet floor and grabbed Hermione around the neck to stop herself from falling.

“Ouch — sorry, Miss Granger —”

“That’s all right, Professor!” Hermione gasped, massaging her throat.

“Peeves, get down here NOW!” barked Professor McGonagall, straightening her pointed hat and glaring upward through her square-rimmed spectacles.

“Not doing nothing!” cackled Peeves, lobbing a water bomb at several fifth-year girls, who screamed and dived into the Great Hall.

“Already wet, aren’t they? Little squirts! Wheeeeeeeeeee!” And he aimed another bomb at a group of second years who had just arrived.

“I shall call the headmaster!” shouted Professor McGonagall. “I’m warning you, Peeves —”

Peeves stuck out his tongue, threw the last of his water bombs into the air, and zoomed off up the marble staircase, cackling insanely.

“Well, move along, then!” said Professor McGonagall sharply to the bedraggled crowd. “Into the Great Hall, come on!”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione slipped and slid across the entrance hall and through the double doors on the right, Ron muttering furiously under his breath as he pushed his sopping hair off his face.

The Great Hall looked its usual splendid self, decorated for the start-of-term feast. Golden plates and goblets gleamed by the light of hundreds and hundreds of candles, floating over the tables in midair. The four long House tables were packed with chattering students; at the top of the Hall, the staff sat along one side of a fifth table, facing their pupils. It was much warmer in here. Harry, Ron, and Hermione walked past the Slytherins, the Ravenclaws, and the Hufflepuffs, and sat down with the rest of the Gryffindors at the far side of the Hall, next to Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor ghost. Pearly white and semitransparent, Nick was dressed tonight in his usual doublet, but with a particularly large ruff, which served the dual purpose of looking extra-festive, and insuring that his head didn’t wobble too much on his partially severed neck.

“Good evening,” he said, beaming at them.

“Says who?” said Harry, taking off his sneakers and emptying them of water. “Hope they hurry up with the Sorting. I’m starving.”

The Sorting of the new students into Houses took place at the start of every school year, but by an unlucky combination of circumstances, Harry hadn't been present at one since his own. He was quite looking forward to it. Just then, a highly excited, breathless voice called down the table.

"Hiya, Harry!"

It was Colin Creevey, a third year to whom Harry was something of a hero.

"Hi, Colin," said Harry warily.

"Harry, guess what? Guess what, Harry? My brother's starting! My brother Dennis!"

"Er — good," said Harry.

"He's really excited!" said Colin, practically bouncing up and down in his seat. "I just hope he's in Gryffindor! Keep your fingers crossed, eh, Harry?"

"Er — yeah, all right," said Harry. He turned back to Hermione, Ron, and Nearly Headless Nick. "Brothers and sisters usually go in the same Houses, don't they?" he said. He was judging by the Weasleys, all seven of whom had been put into Gryffindor.

"Oh no, not necessarily," said Hermione. "Parvati Patil's twin's in Ravenclaw, and they're identical. You'd think they'd be together, wouldn't you?"

Harry looked up at the staff table. There seemed to be rather more empty seats there than usual. Hagrid, of course, was still fighting his way across the lake with the first years; Professor McGonagall was presumably supervising the drying of the entrance hall floor, but there was another empty chair too, and Harry couldn't think who else was

missing.

“Where’s the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?” said Hermione, who was also looking up at the teachers.

They had never yet had a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher who had lasted more than three terms. Harry’s favorite by far had been Professor Lupin, who had resigned last year. He looked up and down the staff table. There was definitely no new face there.

“Maybe they couldn’t get anyone!” said Hermione, looking anxious.

Harry scanned the table more carefully. Tiny little Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, was sitting on a large pile of cushions beside Professor Sprout, the Herbology teacher, whose hat was askew over her flyaway gray hair. She was talking to Professor Sinistra of the Astronomy department. On Professor Sinistra’s other side was the sallow-faced, hook-nosed, greasy-haired Potions master, Snape — Harry’s least favorite person at Hogwarts. Harry’s loathing of Snape was matched only by Snape’s hatred of him, a hatred which had, if possible, intensified last year, when Harry had helped Sirius escape right under Snape’s overlarge nose — Snape and Sirius had been enemies since their own school days.

On Snape’s other side was an empty seat, which Harry guessed was Professor McGonagall’s. Next to it, and in the very center of the table, sat Professor Dumbledore, the headmaster, his sweeping silver hair and beard shining in the candlelight, his magnificent deep green robes embroidered with many stars and moons. The tips of Dumbledore’s long, thin fingers were together and he was resting his chin upon them, staring up at the ceiling through his half-moon

spectacles as though lost in thought. Harry glanced up at the ceiling too. It was enchanted to look like the sky outside, and he had never seen it look this stormy. Black and purple clouds were swirling across it, and as another thunderclap sounded outside, a fork of lightning flashed across it.

“Oh hurry up,” Ron moaned, beside Harry, “I could eat a hippogriff.”

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than the doors of the Great Hall opened and silence fell. Professor McGonagall was leading a long line of first years up to the top of the Hall. If Harry, Ron, and Hermione were wet, it was nothing to how these first years looked. They appeared to have swum across the lake rather than sailed. All of them were shivering with a combination of cold and nerves as they filed along the staff table and came to a halt in a line facing the rest of the school — all of them except the smallest of the lot, a boy with mousy hair, who was wrapped in what Harry recognized as Hagrid’s moleskin overcoat. The coat was so big for him that it looked as though he were draped in a furry black circus tent. His small face protruded from over the collar, looking almost painfully excited. When he had lined up with his terrified-looking peers, he caught Colin Creevey’s eye, gave a double thumbs-up, and mouthed, *I fell in the lake!* He looked positively delighted about it.

Professor McGonagall now placed a four-legged stool on the ground before the first years and, on top of it, an extremely old, dirty, patched wizard’s hat. The first years stared at it. So did everyone else. For a moment, there was silence. Then a long tear near the brim opened wide like a mouth, and the hat broke into song:

*A thousand years or more ago,
When I was newly sewn,
There lived four wizards of renown,
Whose names are still well known:
Bold Gryffindor, from wild moor,
Fair Ravenclaw, from glen,
Sweet Hufflepuff, from valley broad,
Shrewd Slytherin, from fen.
They shared a wish, a hope, a dream,
They hatched a daring plan
To educate young sorcerers
Thus Hogwarts School began.
Now each of these four founders
Formed their own House, for each
Did value different virtues
In the ones they had to teach.
By Gryffindor, the bravest were
Prized far beyond the rest;
For Ravenclaw, the cleverest
Would always be the best;
For Hufflepuff, hard workers were
Most worthy of admission;
And power-hungry Slytherin
Loved those of great ambition.
While still alive they did divide
Their favorites from the throng,*

*Yet how to pick the worthy ones
When they were dead and gone?
'Twas Gryffindor who found the way,
He whipped me off his head
The founders put some brains in me
So I could choose instead!
Now slip me snug about your ears,
I've never yet been wrong,
I'll have a look inside your mind
And tell where you belong!*

The Great Hall rang with applause as the Sorting Hat finished.

“That’s not the song it sang when it Sorted us,” said Harry, clapping along with everyone else.

“Sings a different one every year,” said Ron. “It’s got to be a pretty boring life, hasn’t it, being a hat? I suppose it spends all year making up the next one.”

Professor McGonagall was now unrolling a large scroll of parchment.

“When I call out your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool,” she told the first years. “When the hat announces your House, you will go and sit at the appropriate table.

“Ackerley, Stewart!”

A boy walked forward, visibly trembling from head to foot, picked up the Sorting Hat, put it on, and sat down on the stool.

“RAVENCLAW!” shouted the hat.

Stewart Ackerley took off the hat and hurried into a seat at the

Ravenclaw table, where everyone was applauding him. Harry caught a glimpse of Cho, the Ravenclaw Seeker, cheering Stewart Ackerley as he sat down. For a fleeting second, Harry had a strange desire to join the Ravenclaw table too.

“Baddock, Malcolm!”

“SLYTHERIN!”

The table on the other side of the hall erupted with cheers; Harry could see Malfoy clapping as Baddock joined the Slytherins. Harry wondered whether Baddock knew that Slytherin House had turned out more Dark witches and wizards than any other. Fred and George hissed Malcolm Baddock as he sat down.

“Branstone, Eleanor!”

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

“Cauldwell, Owen!”

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

“Creevey, Dennis!”

Tiny Dennis Creevey staggered forward, tripping over Hagrid’s moleskin, just as Hagrid himself sidled into the Hall through a door behind the teachers’ table. About twice as tall as a normal man, and at least three times as broad, Hagrid, with his long, wild, tangled black hair and beard, looked slightly alarming — a misleading impression, for Harry, Ron, and Hermione knew Hagrid to possess a very kind nature. He winked at them as he sat down at the end of the staff table and watched Dennis Creevey putting on the Sorting Hat. The rip at the brim opened wide —

“GRYFFINDOR!” the hat shouted.

Hagrid clapped along with the Gryffindors as Dennis Creevey,

beaming widely, took off the hat, placed it back on the stool, and hurried over to join his brother.

“Colin, I fell in!” he said shrilly, throwing himself into an empty seat. “It was brilliant! And something in the water grabbed me and pushed me back in the boat!”

“Cool!” said Colin, just as excitedly. “It was probably the giant squid, Dennis!”

“*Wow!*” said Dennis, as though nobody in their wildest dreams could hope for more than being thrown into a storm-tossed, fathoms-deep lake, and pushed out of it again by a giant sea monster.

“Dennis! Dennis! See that boy down there? The one with the black hair and glasses? See him? *Know who he is, Dennis?*”

Harry looked away, staring very hard at the Sorting Hat, now Sorting Emma Dobbs.

The Sorting continued; boys and girls with varying degrees of fright on their faces moving one by one to the four-legged stool, the line dwindling slowly as Professor McGonagall passed the L’s.

“Oh hurry up,” Ron moaned, massaging his stomach.

“Now, Ron, the Sorting’s much more important than food,” said Nearly Headless Nick as “Madley, Laura!” became a Hufflepuff.

“Course it is, if you’re dead,” snapped Ron.

“I do hope this year’s batch of Gryffindors are up to scratch,” said Nearly Headless Nick, applauding as “McDonald, Natalie!” joined the Gryffindor table. “We don’t want to break our winning streak, do we?”

Gryffindor had won the Inter-House Championship for the last three years in a row.

“Pritchard, Graham!”

“SLYTHERIN!”

“Quirke, Orla!”

“RAVENCLAW!”

And finally, with “Whitby, Kevin!” (“HUFFLEPUFF!”), the Sorting ended. Professor McGonagall picked up the hat and the stool and carried them away.

“About time,” said Ron, seizing his knife and fork and looking expectantly at his golden plate.

Professor Dumbledore had gotten to his feet. He was smiling around at the students, his arms opened wide in welcome.

“I have only two words to say to you,” he told them, his deep voice echoing around the Hall. *“Tuck in.”*

“Hear, hear!” said Harry and Ron loudly as the empty dishes filled magically before their eyes.

Nearly Headless Nick watched mournfully as Harry, Ron, and Hermione loaded their own plates.

“Aaah, ’at’s be’er,” said Ron, with his mouth full of mashed potato.

“You’re lucky there’s a feast at all tonight, you know,” said Nearly Headless Nick. “There was trouble in the kitchens earlier.”

“Why? Wha’ ’appened?” said Harry, through a sizable chunk of steak.

“Peeves, of course,” said Nearly Headless Nick, shaking his head, which wobbled dangerously. He pulled his ruff a little higher up on his neck. “The usual argument, you know. He wanted to attend the feast — well, it’s quite out of the question, you know what he’s like,

utterly uncivilized, can't see a plate of food without throwing it. We held a ghost's council — the Fat Friar was all for giving him the chance — but most wisely, in my opinion, the Bloody Baron put his foot down.”

The Bloody Baron was the Slytherin ghost, a gaunt and silent specter covered in silver bloodstains. He was the only person at Hogwarts who could really control Peeves.

“Yeah, we thought Peeves seemed hacked off about something,” said Ron darkly. “So what did he do in the kitchens?”

“Oh the usual,” said Nearly Headless Nick, shrugging. “Wreaked havoc and mayhem. Pots and pans everywhere. Place swimming in soup. Terrified the house-elves out of their wits —”

Clang.

Hermione had knocked over her golden goblet. Pumpkin juice spread steadily over the tablecloth, staining several feet of white linen orange, but Hermione paid no attention.

“There are house-elves *here*?” she said, staring, horror-struck, at Nearly Headless Nick. “Here at *Hogwarts*?”

“Certainly,” said Nearly Headless Nick, looking surprised at her reaction. “The largest number in any dwelling in Britain, I believe. Over a hundred.”

“I’ve never seen one!” said Hermione.

“Well, they hardly ever leave the kitchen by day, do they?” said Nearly Headless Nick. “They come out at night to do a bit of cleaning . . . see to the fires and so on. . . . I mean, you’re not supposed to see them, are you? That’s the mark of a good house-elf, isn’t it, that you don’t know it’s there?”

Hermione stared at him.

“But they get *paid*?” she said. “They get *holidays*, don’t they? And — and sick leave, and pensions, and everything?”

Nearly Headless Nick chortled so much that his ruff slipped and his head flopped off, dangling on the inch or so of ghostly skin and muscle that still attached it to his neck.

“Sick leave and pensions?” he said, pushing his head back onto his shoulders and securing it once more with his ruff. “House-elves don’t want sick leave and pensions!”

Hermione looked down at her hardly touched plate of food, then put her knife and fork down upon it and pushed it away from her.

“Oh c’mon, ’Er-my-knee,” said Ron, accidentally spraying Harry with bits of Yorkshire pudding. “Oops — sorry, ’Arry —” He swallowed. “You won’t get them sick leave by starving yourself!”

“Slave labor,” said Hermione, breathing hard through her nose. “That’s what made this dinner. *Slave labor*.”

And she refused to eat another bite.

The rain was still drumming heavily against the high, dark glass. Another clap of thunder shook the windows, and the stormy ceiling flashed, illuminating the golden plates as the remains of the first course vanished and were replaced, instantly, with puddings.

“Treacle tart, Hermione!” said Ron, deliberately wafting its smell toward her. “Spotted dick, look! Chocolate gateau!”

But Hermione gave him a look so reminiscent of Professor McGonagall that he gave up.

When the puddings too had been demolished, and the last crumbs had faded off the plates, leaving them sparkling clean, Albus

Dumbledore got to his feet again. The buzz of chatter filling the Hall ceased almost at once, so that only the howling wind and pounding rain could be heard.

“So!” said Dumbledore, smiling around at them all. “Now that we are all fed and watered,” (“Hmph!” said Hermione) “I must once more ask for your attention, while I give out a few notices.

“Mr. Filch, the caretaker, has asked me to tell you that the list of objects forbidden inside the castle has this year been extended to include Screaming Yo-yos, Fanged Frisbees, and Ever-Bashing Boomerangs. The full list comprises some four hundred and thirty-seven items, I believe, and can be viewed in Mr. Filch’s office, if anybody would like to check it.”

The corners of Dumbledore’s mouth twitched. He continued, “As ever, I would like to remind you all that the forest on the grounds is out-of-bounds to students, as is the village of Hogsmeade to all below third year.

“It is also my painful duty to inform you that the Inter-House Quidditch Cup will not take place this year.”

“*What?*” Harry gasped. He looked around at Fred and George, his fellow members of the Quidditch team. They were mouthing soundlessly at Dumbledore, apparently too appalled to speak. Dumbledore went on, “This is due to an event that will be starting in October, and continuing throughout the school year, taking up much of the teachers’ time and energy — but I am sure you will all enjoy it immensely. I have great pleasure in announcing that this year at Hogwarts —”

But at that moment, there was a deafening rumble of thunder and

the doors of the Great Hall banged open.

A man stood in the doorway, leaning upon a long staff, shrouded in a black traveling cloak. Every head in the Great Hall swiveled toward the stranger, suddenly brightly illuminated by a fork of lightning that flashed across the ceiling. He lowered his hood, shook out a long mane of grizzled, dark gray hair, then began to walk up toward the teachers' table.

A dull *clunk* echoed through the Hall on his every other step. He reached the end of the top table, turned right, and limped heavily toward Dumbledore. Another flash of lightning crossed the ceiling. Hermione gasped.

The lightning had thrown the man's face into sharp relief, and it was a face unlike any Harry had ever seen. It looked as though it had been carved out of weathered wood by someone who had only the vaguest idea of what human faces are supposed to look like, and was none too skilled with a chisel. Every inch of skin seemed to be scarred. The mouth looked like a diagonal gash, and a large chunk of the nose was missing. But it was the man's eyes that made him frightening.

One of them was small, dark, and beady. The other was large, round as a coin, and a vivid, electric blue. The blue eye was moving ceaselessly, without blinking, and was rolling up, down, and from side to side, quite independently of the normal eye — and then it rolled right over, pointing into the back of the man's head, so that all they could see was whiteness.

The stranger reached Dumbledore. He stretched out a hand that was as badly scarred as his face, and Dumbledore shook it, muttering

words Harry couldn't hear. He seemed to be making some inquiry of the stranger, who shook his head unsmilingly and replied in an undertone. Dumbledore nodded and gestured the man to the empty seat on his right-hand side.

The stranger sat down, shook his mane of dark gray hair out of his face, pulled a plate of sausages toward him, raised it to what was left of his nose, and sniffed it. He then took a small knife out of his pocket, speared a sausage on the end of it, and began to eat. His normal eye was fixed upon the sausages, but the blue eye was still darting restlessly around in its socket, taking in the Hall and the students.

"May I introduce our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?" said Dumbledore brightly into the silence. "Professor Moody."

It was usual for new staff members to be greeted with applause, but none of the staff or students clapped except Dumbledore and Hagrid, who both put their hands together and applauded, but the sound echoed dismally into the silence, and they stopped fairly quickly. Everyone else seemed too transfixed by Moody's bizarre appearance to do more than stare at him.

"Moody?" Harry muttered to Ron. "*Mad-Eye Moody?* The one your dad went to help this morning?"

"Must be," said Ron in a low, awed voice.

"What happened to him?" Hermione whispered. "What happened to his *face*?"

"Dunno," Ron whispered back, watching Moody with fascination.

Moody seemed totally indifferent to his less-than-warm welcome. Ignoring the jug of pumpkin juice in front of him, he reached again

into his traveling cloak, pulled out a hip flask, and took a long draught from it. As he lifted his arm to drink, his cloak was pulled a few inches from the ground, and Harry saw, below the table, several inches of carved wooden leg, ending in a clawed foot.

Dumbledore cleared his throat.

“As I was saying,” he said, smiling at the sea of students before him, all of whom were still gazing transfixed at Mad-Eye Moody, “we are to have the honor of hosting a very exciting event over the coming months, an event that has not been held for over a century. It is my very great pleasure to inform you that the Triwizard Tournament will be taking place at Hogwarts this year.”

“You’re JOKING!” said Fred Weasley loudly.

The tension that had filled the Hall ever since Moody’s arrival suddenly broke. Nearly everyone laughed, and Dumbledore chuckled appreciatively.

“I am *not* joking, Mr. Weasley,” he said, “though now that you mention it, I did hear an excellent one over the summer about a troll, a hag, and a leprechaun who all go into a bar . . .”

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat loudly.

“Er — but maybe this is not the time . . . no . . .” said Dumbledore, “where was I? Ah yes, the Triwizard Tournament . . . well, some of you will not know what this tournament involves, so I hope those who *do* know will forgive me for giving a short explanation, and allow their attention to wander freely.

“The Triwizard Tournament was first established some seven hundred years ago as a friendly competition between the three largest European schools of wizardry: Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and

Durmstrang. A champion was selected to represent each school, and the three champions competed in three magical tasks. The schools took it in turns to host the tournament once every five years, and it was generally agreed to be a most excellent way of establishing ties between young witches and wizards of different nationalities — until, that is, the death toll mounted so high that the tournament was discontinued.”

“*Death toll?*” Hermione whispered, looking alarmed. But her anxiety did not seem to be shared by the majority of students in the Hall; many of them were whispering excitedly to one another, and Harry himself was far more interested in hearing about the tournament than in worrying about deaths that had happened hundreds of years ago.

“There have been several attempts over the centuries to reinstate the tournament,” Dumbledore continued, “none of which has been very successful. However, our own Departments of International Magical Cooperation and Magical Games and Sports have decided the time is ripe for another attempt. We have worked hard over the summer to ensure that this time, no champion will find himself or herself in mortal danger.

“The Heads of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving with their shortlisted contenders in October, and the selection of the three champions will take place at Halloween. An impartial judge will decide which students are most worthy to compete for the Triwizard Cup, the glory of their school, and a thousand Galleons personal prize money.”

“I’m going for it!” Fred Weasley hissed down the table, his face lit

with enthusiasm at the prospect of such glory and riches. He was not the only person who seemed to be visualizing himself as the Hogwarts champion. At every House table, Harry could see people either gazing raptly at Dumbledore, or else whispering fervently to their neighbors. But then Dumbledore spoke again, and the Hall quieted once more.

“Eager though I know all of you will be to bring the Triwizard Cup to Hogwarts,” he said, “the Heads of the participating schools, along with the Ministry of Magic, have agreed to impose an age restriction on contenders this year. Only students who are of age — that is to say, seventeen years or older — will be allowed to put forward their names for consideration. This” — Dumbledore raised his voice slightly, for several people had made noises of outrage at these words, and the Weasley twins were suddenly looking furious — “is a measure we feel is necessary, given that the tournament tasks will still be difficult and dangerous, whatever precautions we take, and it is highly unlikely that students below sixth and seventh year will be able to cope with them. I will personally be ensuring that no underage student hoodwinks our impartial judge into making them Hogwarts champion.” His light blue eyes twinkled as they flickered over Fred’s and George’s mutinous faces. “I therefore beg you not to waste your time submitting yourself if you are under seventeen.

“The delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving in October and remaining with us for the greater part of this year. I know that you will all extend every courtesy to our foreign guests while they are with us, and will give your whole-hearted support to the Hogwarts champion when he or she is selected. And

now, it is late, and I know how important it is to you all to be alert and rested as you enter your lessons tomorrow morning. Bedtime! Chop chop!”

Dumbledore sat down again and turned to talk to Mad-Eye Moody. There was a great scraping and banging as all the students got to their feet and swarmed toward the double doors into the entrance hall.

“They can’t do that!” said George Weasley, who had not joined the crowd moving toward the door, but was standing up and glaring at Dumbledore. “We’re seventeen in April, why can’t we have a shot?”

“They’re not stopping me entering,” said Fred stubbornly, also scowling at the top table. “The champions’ll get to do all sorts of stuff you’d never be allowed to do normally. And a thousand Galleons prize money!”

“Yeah,” said Ron, a faraway look on his face. “Yeah, a thousand Galleons . . .”

“Come on,” said Hermione, “we’ll be the only ones left here if you don’t move.”

Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred, and George set off for the entrance hall, Fred and George debating the ways in which Dumbledore might stop those who were under seventeen from entering the tournament.

“Who’s this impartial judge who’s going to decide who the champions are?” said Harry.

“Dunno,” said Fred, “but it’s them we’ll have to fool. I reckon a couple of drops of Aging Potion might do it, George. . . .”

“Dumbledore knows you’re not of age, though,” said Ron.

“Yeah, but he’s not the one who decides who the champion is, is he?” said Fred shrewdly. “Sounds to me like once this judge knows

who wants to enter, he'll choose the best from each school and never mind how old they are. Dumbledore's trying to stop us giving our names."

"People have died, though!" said Hermione in a worried voice as they walked through a door concealed behind a tapestry and started up another, narrower staircase.

"Yeah," said Fred airily, "but that was years ago, wasn't it? Anyway, where's the fun without a bit of risk? Hey, Ron, what if we find out how to get 'round Dumbledore? Fancy entering?"

"What d'you reckon?" Ron asked Harry. "Be cool to enter, wouldn't it? But I s'pose they might want someone older. . . . Dunno if we've learned enough. . . ."

"I definitely haven't," came Neville's gloomy voice from behind Fred and George.

"I expect my gran'd want me to try, though. She's always going on about how I should be upholding the family honor. I'll just have to — oops. . . ."

Neville's foot had sunk right through a step halfway up the staircase. There were many of these trick stairs at Hogwarts; it was second nature to most of the older students to jump this particular step, but Neville's memory was notoriously poor. Harry and Ron seized him under the armpits and pulled him out, while a suit of armor at the top of the stairs creaked and clanked, laughing wheezily.

"Shut it, you," said Ron, banging down its visor as they passed.

They made their way up to the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, which was concealed behind a large portrait of a fat lady in a pink silk dress.

“Password?” she said as they approached.

“Balderdash,” said George, “a prefect downstairs told me.”

The portrait swung forward to reveal a hole in the wall through which they all climbed. A crackling fire warmed the circular common room, which was full of squashy armchairs and tables. Hermione cast the merrily dancing flames a dark look, and Harry distinctly heard her mutter “*Slave labor*,” before bidding them good night and disappearing through the doorway to the girls’ dormitory.

Harry, Ron, and Neville climbed up the last, spiral staircase until they reached their own dormitory, which was situated at the top of the tower. Five four-poster beds with deep crimson hangings stood against the walls, each with its owner’s trunk at the foot. Dean and Seamus were already getting into bed; Seamus had pinned his Ireland rosette to his headboard, and Dean had tacked up a poster of Viktor Krum over his bedside table. His old poster of the West Ham football team was pinned right next to it.

“Mental,” Ron sighed, shaking his head at the completely stationary soccer players.

Harry, Ron, and Neville got into their pajamas and into bed. Someone — a house-elf, no doubt — had placed warming pans between the sheets. It was extremely comfortable, lying there in bed and listening to the storm raging outside.

“I might go in for it, you know,” Ron said sleepily through the darkness, “if Fred and George find out how to . . . the tournament . . . you never know, do you?”

“S’pose not. . . .”

Harry rolled over in bed, a series of dazzling new pictures forming

in his mind's eye. . . . He had hoodwinked the impartial judge into believing he was seventeen . . . he had become Hogwarts champion . . . he was standing on the grounds, his arms raised in triumph in front of the whole school, all of whom were applauding and screaming . . . he had just won the Triwizard Tournament. . . . Cho's face stood out particularly clearly in the blurred crowd, her face glowing with admiration. . . .

Harry grinned into his pillow, exceptionally glad that Ron couldn't see what he could.

Die Drietowenaarstoernooi

Deur die poort met die standbeelde van gevleuelde wildevarke aan weerskante en op met die lang rypad klater die koetse wat gevaarlik heen en weer swaai in wat besig is om 'n ware storm te word. Harry leun teen die venster en sien hoe Hogwarts al nader kom. Die vele verligte vensters lyk dof en wasig agter die digte gordyn van reën. Weerlig flits oor die hemel toe hul koets voor 'n stel steil kliptrappe tot stilstand kom. Die mense in die koetse voor hulle skarrel reeds op met die trappe na die groot eikehoutvoordeure van die kasteel; Harry, Ron, Hermien en Neville spring uit hul koets en haas hulle ook na bo. Hulle kyk eers op toe hulle veilig binne-in die spelonkagtige Ingangsportaal staan. Die portaal is verlig met fakkels en spog met 'n manjifieke marmertap.

“Genade,” sê Ron toe hy sy kop skud sodat die water spat, “as dit moet aanhou, gaan die meer sowaar oorloop. Ek is sopnat – AARG!”

'n Groot rooi waterballon het van bo van die plafon af op Ron se kop geval en oopgebars. Druipnat en hoes-hoes steier Ron eenkant toe en vas in Harry, net toe 'n tweede waterbom Hermien rakelings mis, aan Harry se voete oopbars en 'n spul koue water oor sy skoene en sokkies mors. Om hulle gil die mense en stamp aan mekaar soos hulle sukkel om buite trefafstand te kom. Harry kyk op en sien vir Nurks die poltergeist, 'n klein mannetjie in 'n klokkieshoed en 'n oranje strikdas, waar hy so tien meter bo hulle sweef. Sy breë, onderduimse gesig is vertrek van konsentrasie toe hy weer na hulle mik.

“NURKS!” gil 'n woedende stem. “Nurks, kom dadelik hier, DADELIK!”

Professor McGonagall, visehoof en hoof van Huis Griffindor, kom haastig by die Groot Saal uitgedraf. Sy gly op die gladde vloer en gryp Hermien om die nek om haar val te breek. “Eina – jammer, juffrou La Grange –”

“Alles reg, professor!” hyg Hermien en vryf haar keel.

“Nurks, kom hier, NOU!” blaf professor McGonagall. Sy stoot haar gepunte hoed reg en gluur na bo deur haar vierkantige brilglase.

“Het niks gedoen nie!” kekkel Nurks en slinger 'n waterbom na 'n paar

vyftedejaars-meisies wat skreeuend na die Groot Saal laat vat. "Is klaar nat, of wat? Spul papbroeke! Wheeeeeee!" Hy mik nog 'n bom na 'n groep tweedejaars wat pas ingekom het.

"Ek sal die skoolhoof gaan roep!" dreig professor McGonagall. "Ek waarsku jou, Nurks –"

Nurks steek sy tong uit, gooi sy laaste waterbomme die lug in en seil met die marmertappe na bo terwyl hy mallerig kekkel.

"Toe, aanstap!" sê professor McGonagall skerp aan die bedremmelde groepie. "Na die Groot Saal, komaan!"

Harry, Ron en Hermien loop glippend en glyend oor die Ingangsportaal en deur die dubbele deure aan hul regterkant terwyl Ron ergerlik binnensmonds brom toe hy sy druipnat hare uit sy gesig vee.

Die Groot Saal lyk net so luisterryk soos altyd wanneer dit vir die fees aan die begin van die jaar versier is. Goue borde en drinkbekers glinster in die lig van honderde en honderde kerse wat in die lug bo die tafels sweef. Die vier lang huistafels is gepak met geselsende studente; aan die hopunt van die Saal sit die personeel langs 'n vyfde tafel op so 'n manier dat hulle na die studente kyk. Dit is baie warmer hier binne. Harry, Ron en Hermien loop verby die Slibberins, die Raweklouers en die Hoesenproesers en gaan sit saam met die res van Griffindor aan die ander kant van die Saal, langs Nick-amper-sonder-kop, Griffindor se spook. Nick is pêrelagtig wit en half deurskynend en dra vannag sy gewone wambuis met 'n besonder groot plooi kraag wat nie net ekstra feestelik lyk nie, maar ook sorg dat sy kop nie te erg op sy gedeeltelik afgesnyde nek wiebel nie.

"Goeienaand," sê hy stralend vir hulle.

"Sê wie," sê Harry terwyl hy sy skoene uittrek en die water uitgooi. "Ek hoop hulle maak gou met die Sorteerdery. Ek is dood van die honger."

Die Sortering van nuwe studente in hul huise vind altyd aan die begin van elke skooljaar plaas. Deur 'n ongelukkige sameloop van omstandighede het Harry nog nie weer een bygewoon sedert sy eie nie. Hy sien nogal uit daarna.

Net toe roep 'n uiters opgewonde, uitasem stem van die onderpunt van die tafel af, "Haai, Harry!"

Dit is Colin Creevey, 'n derdejaar vir wie Harry 'n soort held is.

"Hallo, Colin," sê Harry versigtig.

"Harry, raai wat? Raai wat, Harry? My broer begin vanjaar! My broer Dennis!"

"E – mooi," sê Harry.

"Hy's baie opgewonde!" sê Colin wat op en af in sy stoel sit en hop. "Ek hoop net hy's in Griffindor! Hou duim vas, hoor, Harry!"

"E – ja, goed," sê Harry. Hy draai weer na Hermien, Ron en Nick-

amper-sonder-kop. “Broers en susters gaan gewoonlik na dieselfde huis, of hoe?” sê hy. Hy oordeel aan die Weasleys wat al sewe in Griffindor was.

“O nee, nie noodwendig nie,” sê Hermien. “Parvati Patel se tweeling is in Raweklou en hulle is identies, ’n mens sou tog sê dat hulle saam moet wees, of hoe?”

Harry kyk op na die personeeltafel. Dit lyk asof daar meer leë sitplekke as gewoonlik is. Hagrid is natuurlik nog steeds besig om met die eerstejaars oor die meer te sukkel; professor McGonagall is waarskynlik besig om seker te maak dat die Ingangsportaal se vloer droog kom, maar daar is nog ’n leë stoel en hy kan net nie dink vir wie dit kan wees nie.

“Waar’s die nuwe onderwyser vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kuns- te?” vra Hermien, wat ook na die onderwysers kyk.

Hulle het nog nooit ’n onderwyser vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kuns- te gehad wat langer as drie termyne gehou het nie. Tot dusver was professor Lupin Harry se gunsteling, maar hy het die vorige jaar bedank. Harry kyk op en af langs die personeel se tafel. Daar is beslis geen nuwe gesigte nie.

“Miskien kon hulle niemand kry nie!” sê Hermien, wat angstig lyk.

Harry bekyk die tafel met meer aandag. Die kleine professor Flicker- pitt, die onderwyser vir Towerspreuke, sit op ’n yslike stapel kussings langs professor Spruit, die Herbologie-onderwyser wie se hoed skeef op haar woeste bos grys hare rus. Sy praat met professor Sinistra van die Sterrekunde-departement. Aan professor Sinistra se ander kant sit die bleekgesig-haakneusmeester van Towerdrankies, Snerp, met sy olierige hare – Harry se mins geliefde persoon by Hogwarts. Harry se walging aan Snerp word net geëwenaar deur Snerp se haat vir hom, ’n haat wat, in- dien moontlik, erger is sedert die vorige jaar toe Harry vir Sirius gehelp het om onder Snerp se oorgroot neus te ontsnap – Snerp en Sirius is vy- ande sedert hulle saam op skool was.

Aan Snerp se ander kant is ’n leë sitplek wat Harry raai professor Mc- Gonagall s’n moet wees. Langsaan, reg in die middel van die tafel, sit pro- fessor Dompeldorius, die skoolhoof. Sy swiepende silwer hare en baard glinster in die kerslig en sy manjifieke diepgroen kled is met talle mane en sterre geborduur. Die punte van Dompeldorius se lang, skraal vingers is teen mekaar gedruk en sy ken rus daarop terwyl hy ingedagte deur sy halfmaanbrilglase na die plafon staar. Harry kyk ook na die plafon. Dit is betower en lyk net soos die hemel daar buite, maar hy het dit nog nooit so stormagtig sien lyk nie. Swart en pers wolke warrel daaroor en toe ’n donderslag buite weergalm, skiet ’n gevurkte weerligstraal oor die plafon.

“Maak tog gou,” kerm Ron langs Harry. “Ek kan ’n hele Hippogrief opeet.”

Sy woorde is skaars koud of die deure voor die Groot Saal gaan oop en

Almal word stil. Professor McGonagall lei 'n lang ry eerstejaars na die bopunt van die Saal. Harry, Ron en Hermien is nat, maar dis niks teen hoe hierdie eerstejaars lyk nie. Dit lyk asof hulle oor die meer geswem en nie geseil het nie. Almal van hulle bewe van koue en afwagting terwyl hulle verby die personeeltafel stap en in 'n ry gaan staan sodat hulle na die res van die skool kyk – almal behalwe die heel kleinste van die klomp, 'n seuntjie met muisvaal hare wat, sien Harry, in Hagrid se molveloorjas toegewikkel is. Die jas is hopeloos te groot vir hom en dit lyk asof 'n markiestent van swart pels oor hom gedrapeer is. 'n Klein gesiggie wat baie opgewonde lyk, steek bo by die kraag uit. Toe hy saam met die res van die verskrikte eerstejaars in die ry staan, vang hy Colin Creevey se oog, steek albei sy duime op en vorm die woorde, “Ek het in die meer geval!” met sy mond. Hy lyk hoogs in sy skik met hierdie prestasie.

Professor McGonagall is besig om 'n driepootstoel op die vloer voor die eerstejaars reg te sit en daarop lê 'n uiters ou, gelapte towenaarshoed. Die eerstejaars staar daarna. So ook al die ander. Vir 'n oomblik heers volslae stilte. Dan gaan 'n skeur soos 'n mond naby die rand oop en die hoed begin sing:

“'n Duisend jaar of meer gelede,
Ek was nog nuut en blink,
Het vier groot towenaars gelewe,
Wie se name steeds weerklink:
Dapper Griffindor uit die heivelde,
Skone Raweklou van die vallei,
Beminde Hoesenproes uit klowe, diep,
Geslepe Slibberin uit die vlei.
Hulle't 'n wens, 'n hoop, 'n droom
Gehad en gewaagde planne gesmee,
Om jong towenaars en hekse
By Hogwarts te laat leer.
Elk van die vier stigters
Het 'n eie huis begin,
Want elk wou ander deugde
In hul studente ontgin.
Vir Griffindor troon die dapperes
Ver bo die ander uit,
Maar Raweklou soek breinkrag:
'n Flink verstand en visie;
Hoesenproes wil harde werkers
In haar span sien staan,
En Slibberin, wat streef na mag,

Werf slegs dié met ambisie.
Toe almal nog gelewe het,
Het elkeen self getob,
Maar hoe gemaak as almal eers
Die dag die emmer skop?
Groot Griffindor het raad gehad,
My van sy kop gelig,
Die stigters sit toe insig in
En die opdrag om te kies!
Dus, plak my knussies op jou kop,
Ek sit jou by jou soort,
Ek lees jou soos die ABC,
En plaas jou waar jy hoort!”

Die Groot Saal daver van die applous toe die Sorteelhoed klaar is.

“Dis nie die lied wat dit gesing het toe ons gesorteer is nie,” sê Harry terwyl hy saam met die ander hande klap.

“Sing elke jaar ’n ander een,” sê Ron. “Dis omtrent ’n vervelige lewe, om ’n hoed te wees, of hoe? Dit vat seker die hele jaar om die volgende lied uit te dink.”

Professor McGonagall is besig om ’n groot rol perkament oop te vou.

“Wanneer ek jou naam uitroep, moet jy op die stoel gaan sit met die Hoed op jou kop,” sê sy vir die eerstejaars. “Sodra die Hoed die naam van jou huis sê, kan jy by die gepaste tafel gaan sit.”

“Ackerley, Stewart!”

’n Seun wat sigbaar van kop tot tone bewee, stap vinnig vorentoe, tel die Sorteelhoed op, plak dit op sy kop en gaan sit op die stoel.

“Raweklou!” skree die Hoed.

Stewart Ackerley haal die Hoed af en haas hom na ’n sitplek by die Rawekloutafel, waar almal vir hom hande klap. Harry kry ’n glimp van Cho, Raweklou se Soeker, waar sy vir Stewart Ackerley aanmoedig toe hy gaan sit. Vir ’n vlietende sekonde ervaar Harry ’n vreemde begeerte om ook by die Rawekloutafel te gaan sit.

“Basana, Malcolm!”

“Slibberin!”

Die tafel aan die ander kant van die Saal bars uit in ’n luide toejuiging; Harry sien hoe Malfoy klap toe Basana by die Slibberins aansluit. Harry wonder of Basana weet dat die Slibberinhuis meer Donker towenaars en hekse opgelewer het as enige ander huis. Fred en George sis vir Malcolm Basana toe hy gaan sit.

“Bruwer, Elna!”

“Hoesenproes!”

“Cauldwell, Owen!”

"Hoesenproes!"

"Creevey, Dennis!"

Die kleine Dennis Creevey steier vorentoe en struikel oor Hagrid se molveljas net toe Hagrid self die Saal by 'n ingang agter die onderwysers se tafel binnekom. Hagrid is omtrent twee keer so lank as 'n normale man en ten minste drie keer so breed. Met sy wilde, gekoekte hare en baard lyk hy nogal vreesaanjaend – wat misleidend is, want Harry, Ron en Hermien weet hoe saggeaard Hagrid eintlik is. Hy knipoog vir hulle toe hy aan die punt van die personeeltafel gaan sit en kyk hoe Dennis Creevey die Sorteelhoed opsit. Die skeur aan die rand gaap wyd en –

"Griffindor!" skree die Hoed.

Hagrid klap saam met die Griffindors hande toe Dennis Creevey breed glimlag, die Hoed afhaal, op die stoel neersit en haastig by sy broer aansluit.

"Colin, ek het ingeval!" sê hy skril toe hy homself in 'n leë sitplek neergooi. "Dit was wonderlik! En iets in die water het my gegryp en my terug in die boot gestoot!"

"Cool!" sê Colin, wat net so opgewonde is. "Ek wed dit was die reuse-inkvis, Dennis!"

"Sjoe!" sê Dennis asof niemand in hul wildste drome iets beters kan verwag as om in 'n stormagtige, bodemlose meer te val net om deur 'n reuseseemonster gered te word nie.

"Dennis! Dennis! Sien jy daardie seun daar oorkant? Die een met die swart hare en die bril? Sien jy hom? Weet jy wie hy is, Dennis?"

Harry kyk vinnig weg en staar baie hard na die Sorteelhoed wat nou vir Emma Dobbs sorteer.

Die Sorteerdery gaan voort; seuns en dogters met wisselende uitdrukkings van vrees op hul gesigte beweeg een vir een na die driepootstoeltjie en die ry word stadig korter. Dan is professor McGonagall klaar met die le.

"Maak tog net gou," kerm Ron en vryf sy maag.

"Komaan, Ron, die Sorteerdery is baie belangriker as kos," sê Nick-amper-sonder-kop toe "Marais, Françoise!" 'n Hoesenproeser word.

"Natuurlik is dit as jy dood is," snou Ron.

"Ek hoop regtig dat vanjaar se klompie Griffindors iets werd is," sê Nick-amper-sonder-kop terwyl hy juig toe "McDonald, Natalie!" by die Griffindors aansluit. "Ons is nou mooi op die wenpad en ons gaan dit so hou, of hoe?"

Griffindor het die Interhuis-kampioenskap reeds drie jaar agtereenvolgens gewen.

"Russianoff, Olga!"

"Slibberin!"

"Quirke, Graham!"

“Raweklou!”

En uiteindelik, met “Whitby, Kevin!” (“Hoesenproes!”) is die Sorteerdery oor. Professor McGonagall tel die Hoed en die stoeltjie op en dra hulle weg.

“Omtrent tyd ook,” sê Ron. Hy gryp sy mes en vurk en kyk vol afwagting na sy goue bord.

Professor Dompeldorius kom orent. Hy glimlag vir die studente, sy arms verwelkomend wyd oop.

“Ek het net twee woorde om aan julle te sê,” sê hy en sy diep stem eggo deur die Saal. “Val weg.”

“Hoor, hoor!” sê Harry en Ron hard toe die leë skottels voor hulle op toweragtige wyse voor hul oë vol kos word.

Nick-amper-sonder-kop kyk droefgeestig toe terwyl Harry, Ron en Hermien hul borde vol laai.

“A, dish be’er,” sê Ron met sy mond vol kapokaartappels.

“Julle kan jul sterre dank dat daar vanaand ’n fees is, hoor,” sê Nick-amper-sonder-kop. “Daar was moeilikheid in die kombuis vroeër vandag.”

“Hoe’om? Wattet ‘ebeer?” sê Harry deur ’n yslike hap beesvleis.

“Nurks, natuurlik,” sê Nick-amper-sonder-kop en skud sy kop wat gevaarlik skommel. Hy trek sy plooi kraag ’n bietjie hoër teen sy nek op. “Die gewone argumente, julle weet. Hy wil die fees bywoon – wel, dis natuurlik buite die kwessie, julle weet hoe hy is, totaal onbeskaaf, kan nie ’n bord kos sien sonder om dit te wil gooi nie. Ons het ’n spookbe-raad gehou – die Vet Monnik was ten volle ten gunste daarvan om hom ’n kans te gee, maar die Bloedige Baron het sy voet neergesit, baie wyslik, na my mening.”

Die Bloedige Baron is die Slibberinspook, ’n uitgeteerde, swygsame spook wat vol silwer bloedvlekke is. Hy is die enigste persoon by Hogwarts wat regtig vir Nurks kan beheer.

“H’m, ons het gedink Nurks is omgekrap oor iets,” sê Ron suur. “Wat het hy alles in die kombuis aangevang?”

“O, die gewone,” sê Nick-amper-sonder-kop skouerophalend. “Moles en amok gemaak. Potte en panne die wêreld vol. Die plek swem in die sop. Die huiselwe is totaal buite hul sinne verskrik –”

Ketang. Hermien het haar goue drinkbeker omgestamp. Pampoensap loop stadig oor die tafeldoek en maak ’n groot oranje vlek op die wit linnê, maar Hermien steur haar glad nie daaraan nie.

“Daar is huiselwe hier?” sê sy en staar geskok na Nick-amper-sonder-kop. “Hier by Hogwarts?”

“Sekerlik,” sê Nick-amper-sonder-kop en hy lyk verbaas oor haar reaksie. “Die grootste aantal in enige woning in die hele Brittanje, so het ek verstaan. Oor ’n honderd.”

“Ek het nog nooit een gesien nie!” sê Hermien.

“Wel, bedags is hulle omtrent die hele tyd in die kombuis,” sê Nick-amper-sonder-kop. “Snags kom hulle uit om ’n bietjie skoon te maak . . . die vuur aan te steek en so aan . . . Ek bedoel, jy’s nie veronderstel om hulle te sien nie, of hoe? Dis tog ’n teken van ’n goeie huiselike, dan nie, dat jy nie weet dat hulle daar is nie?”

Hermien staar na hom.

“Hulle word darem seker betaal?” sê sy. “Hulle kry vakansies, of wat? En – en siekverlof en pensioene en alles?”

Nick-amper-sonder-kop lag so hard dat sy plooi kraag afgly en sy kop omkantel en net aan die smal strook spookagtige spier en vel waarmee dit nog aan sy nek geheg is, bly hang.

“Siekverlof en pensioene?” sê hy terwyl hy sy kop terug op sy skouers druk en opnuut met sy plooi kraag vaswoel. “Huiselike wil nie siekverlof en pensioene hê nie!”

Hermien kyk na haar bord kos waaraan sy nog skaars geraak het, sit haar mes en vurk daarop neer en stoot dit van haar af weg.

“Ag, k’maan, ’Ermien,” sê Ron en sprei vir Harry per ongeluk met stukkie Yorkshire-poeding. “Oepsj – jammer, ’Arry –” Hy sluk swaar. “Jy wil nie vir hulle siekverlof en pensioene kry deur jouself te verhungers nie!”

“Slawearbeid,” sê Hermien en haal hard deur haar neus asem. “Dis hoe hierdie aandete gemaak is. Met slawearbeid.”

En met hierdie woorde weier sy om ’n verdere mond vol te eet.

Die reën hamer nog steeds teen die hoë, donker vensters. Nog ’n donderslag skud die vensters en die stormagtige plafon maak blitse wat die goue borde verlig toe dié oorblyfsels van die hoofmaal tyd verdwyn en onmiddellik deur nagereg vervang word.

“Strooptert, Hermien!” sê Ron en waai die geur aspris na haar toe. “Korintepoeding, kyk! Sjokoladeroomkoek!”

Hermien gee hom egter ’n kyk wat so baie aan professor McGonagall herinner dat hy dadelik stil word.

Toe die poedings ook verorber is en die laaste krummels van die borde verdwyn het sodat alles sprankelend skoon is, kom Albus Dompeldorius weer orent. Die gegons van stemme wat die Saal gevul het, klaar dadelik op sodat slegs die gehuil van die wind en die gehamer van die reën gehoor kan word.

“So!” sê Dompeldorius en glimlag vir almal. “Noudat almal iets te ete en drinke gehad het (‘G’mf!’ sê Hermien), moet ek julle weer eens vra om aandag te gee terwyl ek ’n paar afkondigings maak.

“Mnr. Fillis, die opsigter, het my gevra om vir julle te sê dat die lys voorwerpe wat hierdie jaar nie in die kasteel toegelaat word nie, uitgebrei is om Jillende Yo-yo’s, Bytende Frisbees en Immerbonsende Boeme-

rangs in te sluit. Die volledige lys beloop tans vierhonderd-sewe-en-der-tig items en kan in mnr. Fillis se kantoor besigtig word indien enigiemand dit wil bestudeer.”

Die hoeke van Dompeldorius se mond bewe.

Dan gaan hy voort, “Soos altyd moet ek julle daaraan herinner dat die Woud op die gronde verbode terrein vir studente is en so ook Hogsmeade vir almal onder hul derde jaar.

“Dit is ook my pynlike plig om almal in te lig dat die Interhuis Kwiddiekbeker nie hierdie jaar sal plaasvind nie.”

“Wat?” Harry snak na asem. Hy kyk om na Fred en George, sy medeledes van die Kwiddiekspan. Hulle maak woordelose geluide na Dompeldorius toe asof hulle buite hul sinne van skok is.

Dompeldorius gaan voort, “Dit is die gevolg van ’n gebeurtenis wat in Oktober gaan begin, regdeur die skooljaar sal voortgaan en groot eise aan die onderwysers se tyd en energie gaan stel – ek is egter oortuig daarvan dat julle almal geweldige groot pret sal hê. Dit is met plesier dat ek aankondig dat daar hierdie jaar, by Hogwarts –”

Op daardie oomblik is daar ’n oorverdowende rammeling van donderweer en die deure van die Groot Saal klap oop.

’n Man wat op ’n lang staf leun en in ’n swart reismantel gehul is, staan in die kosyn. Elke kop in die Groot Saal draai na die vreemdeling, wat skielik helder afgeteken staan in die lig van ’n gevurkte weerligstraal wat oor die plafon blits. Hy laat sak sy kop, skud ’n groot maanhaar van gevlekte donkergrou hare terug en stap na die onderwysers se tafel.

Met elke tree wat hy gee, weerklink ’n dowwe klonk deur die Saal. Toe hy die punt van die boonste tafel bereik, draai hy na regs en stap hinkend en swaar op Dompeldorius af. Nog ’n weerligstraal kruis die plafon en Hermien snak hoorbaar na asem.

Die weerligstraal het die man se gesig skerp afgeteken en dit is ’n gesig anders as enigiets wat Harry nog ooit gesien het. Dit lyk asof dit uit verweerde hout gekerf is deur iemand wat net ’n vae idee het van hoe menslike gesigte werklik lyk en boonop glad nie vaardig met ’n beitel is nie. Dit lyk of elke kolletjie van die vel vol littekens is. Die mond is ’n blote diagonale spleet en ’n groot deel van die neus is net nie daar nie. Dit is egter die man se oë wat hom vreesaanjaend maak.

Een van hulle is klein, donker en kraalagtig. Die ander een is groot, so rond soos ’n muntstuk en ’n helder, elektriese blou. Die blou oog beweeg sonder ophou, sonder om te knip. Dit rol op en af en van kant tot kant, totaal onafhanklik van die normale oog – dan rol dit reg om sodat dit binne-in die man se agterkop kyk en die wit al is wat hulle kan sien.

Die vreemdeling het vir Dompeldorius bereik. Hy steek ’n hand uit wat net so geskend soos sy gesig is en Dompeldorius skud dit terwyl hy woorde mompel wat Harry nie kan hoor nie. Dit lyk asof hy die vreem-

derling iets vra, want hy skud sy kop sonder om te glimlag en antwoord in 'n gesmoorde stem. Dompeldorius knik en beduie na die leë sitplek net regs van hom.

Die vreemdeling gaan sit, skud sy donkergrys maanhaar uit sy gesig, trek 'n bord worsies nader, lig dit tot onder die reste van sy neus en ruik daaraan. Dan haal hy 'n kleinerige messie uit sy sak, steek dit soos 'n spies deur 'n worsie en begin eet. Sy normale oog is vasgenaël op die wors, maar die blou oog dartel rusteloos in sy kas rond en neem die Saal en al die studente in.

“Laat ek ons nuwe onderwyser vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kuns te aan julle voorstel,” sê Dompeldorius opgewek teenoor die stilte. “Professor Moodie.”

Dit is normaal vir nuwe personeellede om met luide toejuiging verwelkom te word, maar nie een van die personeel of studente klap hande nie, buiten Dompeldorius en Hagrid. Hulle klap albei hard, maar die klank klink troosteloos in die stil Saal en hulle hou redelik gou weer op. Dis of al die ander te verbyster is deur Moodie se bisarre voorkoms om iets anders te kan doen as om na hom te staar.

“Moodie?” brom Harry teenoor Ron. “Maloog Moodie? Die een vir wie jou pa vanoggend gaan help het?”

“Moet wees,” sê Ron in 'n gedempte en geskokte stem.

“Wat het met hom gebeur?” fluister Hermien. “Wat gaan met sy gesig aan?”

“Weet nie,” fluister Ron terug terwyl hy gefassineer na Moodie staar.

Dit lyk asof Moodie totaal onverskillig teenoor die flou verwelkoming staan. Hy ignoreer die beker met pampoensap voor hom, steek sy hand weer in sy reismantel, haal 'n heupfles uit en neem 'n lang teug. Toe hy sy arm lig om te drink, beweeg sy mantel 'n paar sentimeter van die grond af en onder die tafel sien Harry 'n gedeelte van 'n gekerfde houtbeen wat in 'n klou eindig.

Dompeldorius maak weer keel skoon.

“Soos ek gesê het,” sê hy en glimlag vir die see van studente voor hom wat almal nog steeds betower na Maloog Moodie staar, “ons gaan die eer hê om 'n baie opwindende gebeurtenis oor die komende klompie maande hier aan te bied, 'n gebeurtenis wat langer as 'n eeu gelede laas plaasgevind het. Dit is met groot genoegdoening dat ek julle in kennis stel dat die Drietowenaarstoernooi vanjaar by Hogwarts gehou gaan word.”

“Dit moet 'n GRAP wees!” sê Fred Weasley hardop.

Die spanning wat sedert Moodie se aankoms oor die Saal gehang het, word plotseling verbreek.

Amper almal lag en Dompeldorius kekkellag waarderend.

“Dit is nie 'n grap nie, mnr. Weasley,” sê hy, “hoewel, nou dat jy dit

noem, ek het hierdie somer 'n uitstekende grap gehoor oor 'n trol, 'n heks en 'n aardmannetjie wat na 'n kroeg gegaan het en –

Professor McGonagall maak haar keel luidrugtig skoon.

“H'm – dalk is dit nie heeltemal die tyd nie . . . nee . . .” sê Dompeldorius. “Waar was ek? A, ja, die Drietowenaarstoernooi . . . Wel, sommige van julle sal nie weet wat hierdie Toernooi behels nie, dus hoop ek dat diegene wat wel weet my sal verskoon as ek 'n vinnige verduideliking gee terwyl hulle aan ander dinge dink.

“Die Drietowenaarstoernooi is ongeveer sewehonderd jaar gelede ingestel as 'n vriendskaplike kompetisie tussen Europa se drie grootste towenaarskole – Hogwarts, Beauxbatons en Durmstrang. 'n Kampioen is gekies om elke skool te verteenwoordig en die drie kampioene het dan in drie magiese take meegeding. Die skole het beurte gemaak om die Toernooi al om die vyf jaar aan te bied en dit is algemeen aanvaar as 'n uitmuntende manier om bande tussen jong hekse en towenaars van verskillende nasionaliteite te smee – dit is, tot die dodetal sulke afmetings aangeneem het dat die Toernooi gestaak is.”

“Dodetal?” fluister Hermien en sy lyk geskok. Dit klink egter nie asof haar ontsteltenis deur die res van die studente in die Saal gedeel word nie; baie van hulle fluister opgewonde onder mekaar en Harry wil veel eerder meer besonderhede oor die Toernooi hoor as wat hy hom gaan bekommer oor sterftes wat honderde jare gelede plaasgevind het.

“Oor die eeue was daar verskeie pogings om die Toernooi weer in te stel,” gaan Dompeldorius voort, “waarvan geeneen egter geslaag was nie. Ons eie Departemente van Internasionale Magiese Samewerking en Magiese Sport en Ontspanning het egter besluit dat die tyd ryp is om opnuut te probeer. Ons het die hele somer hard gewerk om te verseker dat geen kampioen hierdie keer aan lewensgevaar blootgestel sal wees nie.

“Die hoofde van Beauxbatons en Durmstrang sal in Oktober opdaag met 'n kortlys van deelnemers en tydens Allerheiligeaand sal die drie kampioene aangewys word. 'n Onpartydige regter sal besluit watter studente die waardigste inskrywings vir die Drietowenaarsbeker sal wees. Hierdie drie kampioene sal deelneem tot glorie van hul skool en ook om 'n persoonlike prysgeld van 'n duisend Galjoene.”

“Ek is in!” sis Fred Weasley teen die tafel af, sy gesig blink van entoesiasme by die vooruitsig aan soveel glorie en rykdom. Hy is ook nie die enigste persoon wat homself as Hogwarts se kampioen sien nie. By elke huistafel kan Harry sien hoe mense óf aandagtig na Dompeldorius staar, óf koorsagtig met diegene langs hulle sit en gesels. Dan praat Dompeldorius verder en die Saal word weer eens stil.

“Gretig soos ek weet julle almal is om die Drietowenaarsbeker vir Hogwarts te verower,” sê hy, “het die hoofde van die deelnemende skole tesame met die Ministerie vir Towerkuns dit gerade geag om vanjaar 'n

ouderdomsbepierking op die deelnemers te plaas. Slegs studente wat hieraan voldoen – dit is, sewentien jaar of ouer – mag hul name vir oorweging opgee. Dit –” en Dompeldorius verhef sy stem so ietwat, want by die aanhoor van hierdie woorde het verskeie mense geluide van afkeer begin maak en die Weasley-tweeling lyk briesend van woede – “is ’n maatreël wat ons voel noodsaaklik is, aangesien die take vir die Toernooi uiters moeilik en gevaarlik is, watter voorsorgmaatreëls ook al getref mag word. Boonop is dit hoogs onwaarskynlik dat studente onder hul sesde en sewende jaar dit sal kan hanteer. Ek sal persoonlik seker maak dat geen student wat nie kwalifiseer ons onpartydige beoordelaar om die bos lei en sodoende die Hogwarts-kampioen word nie.” Sy ligblou oë vonkel toe hulle oor Fred en George se rebelse gesigte speel. “Ek versoek dat julle nie jul tyd mors deur in te skryf indien julle onder sewentien is nie.

“Die afvaardigings van Beauxbatons en Durmstrang sal in Oktober aankom en vir die grootste deel van die jaar by ons bly. Ek aanvaar dat julle ons vreemde gaste met die grootste hoflikheid sal ontvang en ook jul heelhartige ondersteuning aan Hogwarts se kampioen sal gee sodra hy of sy gekies is. Dit is nou egter laat en ek weet hoe belangrik dit vir julle is om op en wakker te wees wanneer julle môreoggend met jul lesse begin. Slaaptyd! Tjoptjop!”

Dompeldorius gaan sit en begin om met Maloog Moodie te praat. Daar is ’n gestamp en ’n geskuifel soos die studente opstaan en na die dubbeldeure wat na die Ingangsportaal lei, swerm.

“Hoe kan hulle dit wil doen?” sê George Weasley wat nie by die skare wat na die deure stroom, aangesluit het nie, maar na Dompeldorius gluur. “Ons sal in April sewentien wees, hoekom kan ons nie probeer nie?”

“Hulle gaan my nie keer nie,” sê Fred koppig terwyl ook hy na die boonste tafel gluur. “Die kampioene sal allerhande goed mag doen wat ’n mens gewoonlik nie mag doen nie. En ’n duisend Galjoene se prysgeld!”

“H’m,” sê Ron met ’n veraf uitdrukking op sy gesig. “’n Duisend Galjoene . . .”

“Komaan,” sê Hermien, “ons sal die enigstes wees wat agterbly as julle nie opskud nie.”

Harry, Ron, Hermien, Fred en George sit af na die Ingangsportaal terwyl Fred en George debatteer oor die maniere wat professor Dompeldorius kan gebruik om diegene wat onder sewentien is te stuit.

“Wie’s hierdie onpartydige regter miskien wat gaan besluit wie die kampioene is?” sê Harry.

“Weet nie,” sê Fred, “maar dis vir wie ons moet kul. Ek dink ’n paar druppels Verouderingspaljas sal werk, George . . .”

“Dompeldorius weet dat jy te jonk is,” sê Ron.

“Ja, maar hy’s nie die een wat gaan besluit wie die kampioen is nie, is hy?” sê Fred uitgeslape. “Soos dit vir my klink, gaan hierdie regter net

eenvoudig die beste uit elke skool se inskrywings kies sonder om hom aan die ouderdomme te steur. Dompeldorius wil net keer dat ons ons name ingee.”

“Mense is dood, nè!” sê Hermien in ’n bekommerde stem toe hulle deur ’n ingang wat agter ’n tapisserie versteek is, stap en nog ’n stel smal trappe uitklim.

“H’m,” sê Fred lighartig, “maar dit was jare gelede, oukei. In elk geval, daar’s geen pret sonder risiko nie. Ek sê, Ron, wat as ons uitwerk hoe om verby Dompeldorius te kom? Sal jy inskryf?”

“Wat dink jy?” vra Ron vir Harry. “Sal nogal lekker wees om in te skryf, of hoe? Maar hulle sal seker iemand wat ouer is, wil hê . . . dink nie ons het al genoeg geleer nie . . .”

“Ek het beslis nog nie,” klink Neville se stem swaarmoedig van agter Fred en George op. “My ouma sal seker wil hê ek moet, sy gaan altyd aan oor hoe ek die familie se naam moet hoog hou. Ek sal net – oeps . . .”

Neville se voet het dwarsdeur ’n treetjie halfpad op met die trappe gesak. Daar is baie sulke foptreetjies by Hogwarts; dit is tweede natuur by die meeste van die ouer studente om oor hierdie spesifieke treetjie te spring, maar Neville is bekend vir sy swak geheue. Harry en Ron gryp hom onder die arms en trek hom uit terwyl ’n wapenrusting aan die bopunt van die trappe kreun en kraak en aamborstig lag.

“Stil, jy,” sê Ron en klap sy visier in die verbygaan toe.

Hulle kies koers na die ingang van die Griffindortoring wat agter ’n groot portret van ’n vet vrou in ’n pienk rok weggesteek is.

“Wagwoord,” sê sy toe hulle nader kom.

“Spekskiet,” sê George, “een van die prefekte daar onder het vir my gesê.”

Die portret swaai vorentoe en ’n gat in die muur word sigbaar. Hulle klim almal daardeur. ’n Knetterende vuur verwarm die sirkelvormige geselskamer wat vol sagte leunstoele en tafels is. Hermien kyk deur vernoude oë na die vrolike, dansende vlamme en Harry hoor duidelik hoe sy “slawearbeid” mompel voor sy vir hulle nagsê en deur die ingang na die meisies se slaapsale verdwyn.

Harry, Ron en Neville klim die laaste wenteltrap uit tot by hul eie slaapsaal wat bo in die toring geleë is. Vyf hemelbeddens met diep karmosynrooi behangsels staan teen die mure en elke eenaar se trommel staan aan die voetenent. Dean en Septimus is reeds in die bed; Septimus het sy Ierse roset teen sy kopstuk vasgesteek en Dean het ’n plakkaat van Viktor Krumm bo sy bedkassie vasgeplak. Sy ou plakkaat van die West Ham-sokkerspan pryk langsaaan.

“Mal,” sug Ron en skud sy kop oor die heeltemal beweginglose sokkerspelers.

Harry, Ron en Neville trek hul nagklere aan en klim in die bed. Iemand

= waarskynlik 'n huiself – het bedverwarmers tussen die lakens gesit. Dit is heerlik om in die bed te kan lê en luister hoe die storm daar buite woed.

“Ek kan dalk daarvoor gaan, weet jy,” sê Ron slaperig vanuit die donkerte, “as Fred en George kan uitvind . . . die Toernooi, nè . . . ’n mens weet nooit nie, of hoe?”

“Seker nie . . .” Harry rol om in sy bed terwyl ’n reeks verblindende nuwe prentjies in sy gemoed vorm aanneem . . . hy het die onpartydige regter gekul om te glo dat hy sewentien is . . . hy het Hogwarts se kampioen geword . . . hy staan op die terrein met sy arms triomfantlik in die lug terwyl die hele skool hom toejuig en skree . . . hy het so pas die Drietowenaarstoernooi gewen . . . Cho se gesig staan veral duidelik uit in die dowwe skare, haar oë gloei van bewondering . . .

Harry grinnik in sy kussing, verlig dat Ron nie kan sien wat hy sien nie.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



MAD-EYE MOODY

The storm had blown itself out by the following morning, though the ceiling in the Great Hall was still gloomy; heavy clouds of pewter gray swirled overhead as Harry, Ron, and Hermione examined their new course schedules at breakfast. A few seats along, Fred, George, and Lee Jordan were discussing magical methods of aging themselves and bluffing their way into the Triwizard Tournament.

“Today’s not bad . . . outside all morning,” said Ron, who was running his finger down his schedule. “Herbology with the Hufflepuffs and Care of Magical Creatures . . . damn it, we’re still with the Slytherins. . . .”

“Double Divination this afternoon,” Harry groaned, looking down.

Divination was his least favorite subject, apart from Potions. Professor Trelawney kept predicting Harry's death, which he found extremely annoying.

"You should have given it up like me, shouldn't you?" said Hermione briskly, buttering herself some toast. "Then you'd be doing something sensible like Arithmancy."

"You're eating again, I notice," said Ron, watching Hermione adding liberal amounts of jam to her toast too.

"I've decided there are better ways of making a stand about elf rights," said Hermione haughtily.

"Yeah . . . and you were hungry," said Ron, grinning.

There was a sudden rustling noise above them, and a hundred owls came soaring through the open windows carrying the morning mail. Instinctively, Harry looked up, but there was no sign of white among the mass of brown and gray. The owls circled the tables, looking for the people to whom their letters and packages were addressed. A large tawny owl soared down to Neville Longbottom and deposited a parcel into his lap — Neville almost always forgot to pack something. On the other side of the Hall Draco Malfoy's eagle owl had landed on his shoulder, carrying what looked like his usual supply of sweets and cakes from home. Trying to ignore the sinking feeling of disappointment in his stomach, Harry returned to his porridge. Was it possible that something had happened to Hedwig, and that Sirius hadn't even got his letter?

His preoccupation lasted all the way across the sodden vegetable patch until they arrived in greenhouse three, but here he was distracted by Professor Sprout showing the class the ugliest plants

Harry had ever seen. Indeed, they looked less like plants than thick, black, giant slugs, protruding vertically out of the soil. Each was squirming slightly and had a number of large, shiny swellings upon it, which appeared to be full of liquid.

“Bubotubers,” Professor Sprout told them briskly. “They need squeezing. You will collect the pus —”

“The *what?*” said Seamus Finnigan, sounding revolted.

“Pus, Finnigan, pus,” said Professor Sprout, “and it’s extremely valuable, so don’t waste it. You will collect the pus, I say, in these bottles. Wear your dragon-hide gloves; it can do funny things to the skin when undiluted, bubotuber pus.”

Squeezing the bubotubers was disgusting, but oddly satisfying. As each swelling was popped, a large amount of thick yellowish-green liquid burst forth, which smelled strongly of petrol. They caught it in the bottles as Professor Sprout had indicated, and by the end of the lesson had collected several pints.

“This’ll keep Madam Pomfrey happy,” said Professor Sprout, stoppering the last bottle with a cork. “An excellent remedy for the more stubborn forms of acne, bubotuber pus. Should stop students resorting to desperate measures to rid themselves of pimples.”

“Like poor Eloise Midgen,” said Hannah Abbott, a Hufflepuff, in a hushed voice. “She tried to curse hers off.”

“Silly girl,” said Professor Sprout, shaking her head. “But Madam Pomfrey fixed her nose back on in the end.”

A booming bell echoed from the castle across the wet grounds, signaling the end of the lesson, and the class separated; the Hufflepuffs climbing the stone steps for Transfiguration, and the

Gryffindors heading in the other direction, down the sloping lawn toward Hagrid's small wooden cabin, which stood on the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

Hagrid was standing outside his hut, one hand on the collar of his enormous black boarhound, Fang. There were several open wooden crates on the ground at his feet, and Fang was whimpering and straining at his collar, apparently keen to investigate the contents more closely. As they drew nearer, an odd rattling noise reached their ears, punctuated by what sounded like minor explosions.

"Mornin'!" Hagrid said, grinning at Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "Be'er wait fer the Slytherins, they won' want ter miss this — Blast-Ended Skrewts!"

"Come again?" said Ron.

Hagrid pointed down into the crates.

"Eurgh!" squealed Lavender Brown, jumping backward.

"Eurgh" just about summed up the Blast-Ended Skrewts in Harry's opinion. They looked like deformed, shell-less lobsters, horribly pale and slimy-looking, with legs sticking out in very odd places and no visible heads. There were about a hundred of them in each crate, each about six inches long, crawling over one another, bumping blindly into the sides of the boxes. They were giving off a very powerful smell of rotting fish. Every now and then, sparks would fly out of the end of a skrewt, and with a small *phut*, it would be propelled forward several inches.

"On'y jus' hatched," said Hagrid proudly, "so yeh'll be able ter raise 'em yerselves! Thought we'd make a bit of a project of it!"

"And why would we *want* to raise them?" said a cold voice.

The Slytherins had arrived. The speaker was Draco Malfoy. Crabbe and Goyle were chuckling appreciatively at his words.

Hagrid looked stumped at the question.

“I mean, what do they *do*?” asked Malfoy. “What is the *point* of them?”

Hagrid opened his mouth, apparently thinking hard; there was a few seconds’ pause, then he said roughly, “Tha’s next lesson, Malfoy. Yer jus’ feedin’ ’em today. Now, yeh’ll wan’ ter try ’em on a few diff’rent things — I’ve never had ’em before, not sure what they’ll go fer — I got ant eggs an’ frog livers an’ a bit o’ grass snake — just try ’em out with a bit of each.”

“First pus and now this,” muttered Seamus.

Nothing but deep affection for Hagrid could have made Harry, Ron, and Hermione pick up squelchy handfuls of frog liver and lower them into the crates to tempt the Blast-Ended Skrewts. Harry couldn’t suppress the suspicion that the whole thing was entirely pointless, because the skrewts didn’t seem to have mouths.

“*Ouch!*” yelled Dean Thomas after about ten minutes. “It got me!”

Hagrid hurried over to him, looking anxious.

“Its end exploded!” said Dean angrily, showing Hagrid a burn on his hand.

“Ah, yeah, that can happen when they blast off,” said Hagrid, nodding.

“Eurgh!” said Lavender Brown again. “Eurgh, Hagrid, what’s that pointy thing on it?”

“Ah, some of ’em have got stings,” said Hagrid enthusiastically (Lavender quickly withdrew her hand from the box). “I reckon

they're the males. . . . The females've got sorta sucker things on their bellies. . . . I think they might be ter suck blood."

"Well, I can certainly see why we're trying to keep them alive," said Malfoy sarcastically. "Who wouldn't want pets that can burn, sting, and bite all at once?"

"Just because they're not very pretty, it doesn't mean they're not useful," Hermione snapped. "Dragon blood's amazingly magical, but you wouldn't want a dragon for a pet, would you?"

Harry and Ron grinned at Hagrid, who gave them a furtive smile from behind his bushy beard. Hagrid would have liked nothing better than a pet dragon, as Harry, Ron, and Hermione knew only too well — he had owned one for a brief period during their first year, a vicious Norwegian Ridgeback by the name of Norbert. Hagrid simply loved monstrous creatures, the more lethal, the better.

"Well, at least the skrewts are small," said Ron as they made their way back up to the castle for lunch an hour later.

"They are *now*," said Hermione in an exasperated voice, "but once Hagrid's found out what they eat, I expect they'll be six feet long."

"Well, that won't matter if they turn out to cure seasickness or something, will it?" said Ron, grinning slyly at her.

"You know perfectly well I only said that to shut Malfoy up," said Hermione. "As a matter of fact I think he's right. The best thing to do would be to stamp on the lot of them before they start attacking us all."

They sat down at the Gryffindor table and helped themselves to lamb chops and potatoes. Hermione began to eat so fast that Harry and Ron stared at her.

“Er — is this the new stand on elf rights?” said Ron. “You’re going to make yourself puke instead?”

“No,” said Hermione, with as much dignity as she could muster with her mouth bulging with sprouts. “I just want to get to the library.”

“*What?*” said Ron in disbelief. “Hermione — it’s the first day back! We haven’t even got homework yet!”

Hermione shrugged and continued to shovel down her food as though she had not eaten for days. Then she leapt to her feet, said, “See you at dinner!” and departed at high speed.

When the bell rang to signal the start of afternoon lessons, Harry and Ron set off for North Tower where, at the top of a tightly spiraling staircase, a silver stepladder led to a circular trapdoor in the ceiling, and the room where Professor Trelawney lived.

The familiar sweet perfume spreading from the fire met their nostrils as they emerged at the top of the stepladder. As ever, the curtains were all closed; the circular room was bathed in a dim reddish light cast by the many lamps, which were all draped with scarves and shawls. Harry and Ron walked through the mass of occupied chintz chairs and poufs that cluttered the room, and sat down at the same small circular table.

“Good day,” said the misty voice of Professor Trelawney right behind Harry, making him jump.

A very thin woman with enormous glasses that made her eyes appear far too large for her face, Professor Trelawney was peering down at Harry with the tragic expression she always wore whenever she saw him. The usual large amount of beads, chains, and bangles

glittered upon her person in the firelight.

“You are preoccupied, my dear,” she said mournfully to Harry. “My inner eye sees past your brave face to the troubled soul within. And I regret to say that your worries are not baseless. I see difficult times ahead for you, alas . . . most difficult . . . I fear the thing you dread will indeed come to pass . . . and perhaps sooner than you think. . . .”

Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. Ron rolled his eyes at Harry, who looked stonily back. Professor Trelawney swept past them and seated herself in a large winged armchair before the fire, facing the class. Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil, who deeply admired Professor Trelawney, were sitting on poufs very close to her.

“My dears, it is time for us to consider the stars,” she said. “The movements of the planets and the mysterious portents they reveal only to those who understand the steps of the celestial dance. Human destiny may be deciphered by the planetary rays, which intermingle . . .”

But Harry’s thoughts had drifted. The perfumed fire always made him feel sleepy and dull-witted, and Professor Trelawney’s rambling talks on fortune-telling never held him exactly spellbound — though he couldn’t help thinking about what she had just said to him. “*I fear the thing you dread will indeed come to pass . . .*”

But Hermione was right, Harry thought irritably, Professor Trelawney really was an old fraud. He wasn’t dreading anything at the moment at all . . . well, unless you counted his fears that Sirius had been caught . . . but what did Professor Trelawney know? He had

long since come to the conclusion that her brand of fortune-telling was really no more than lucky guesswork and a spooky manner.

Except, of course, for that time at the end of last term, when she had made the prediction about Voldemort rising again . . . and Dumbledore himself had said that he thought that trance had been genuine, when Harry had described it to him . . .

“Harry!” Ron muttered.

“What?”

Harry looked around; the whole class was staring at him. He sat up straight; he had been almost dozing off, lost in the heat and his thoughts.

“I was saying, my dear, that you were clearly born under the baleful influence of Saturn,” said Professor Trelawney, a faint note of resentment in her voice at the fact that he had obviously not been hanging on her words.

“Born under — what, sorry?” said Harry.

“Saturn, dear, the planet Saturn!” said Professor Trelawney, sounding definitely irritated that he wasn’t riveted by this news. “I was saying that Saturn was surely in a position of power in the heavens at the moment of your birth. . . . Your dark hair . . . your mean stature . . . tragic losses so young in life . . . I think I am right in saying, my dear, that you were born in midwinter?”

“No,” said Harry, “I was born in July.”

Ron hastily turned his laugh into a hacking cough.

Half an hour later, each of them had been given a complicated circular chart, and was attempting to fill in the position of the planets at their moment of birth. It was dull work, requiring much

consultation of timetables and calculation of angles.

“I’ve got two Neptunes here,” said Harry after a while, frowning down at his piece of parchment, “that can’t be right, can it?”

“Aaaaah,” said Ron, imitating Professor Trelawney’s mystical whisper, “when two Neptunes appear in the sky, it is a sure sign that a midget in glasses is being born, Harry. . . .”

Seamus and Dean, who were working nearby, sniggered loudly, though not loudly enough to mask the excited squeals from Lavender Brown — “Oh Professor, look! I think I’ve got an unaspected planet! Oooh, which one’s that, Professor?”

“It is Uranus, my dear,” said Professor Trelawney, peering down at the chart.

“Can I have a look at Uranus too, Lavender?” said Ron.

Most unfortunately, Professor Trelawney heard him, and it was this, perhaps, that made her give them so much homework at the end of the class.

“A detailed analysis of the way the planetary movements in the coming month will affect you, with reference to your personal chart,” she snapped, sounding much more like Professor McGonagall than her usual airy-fairy self. “I want it ready to hand in next Monday, and no excuses!”

“Miserable old bat,” said Ron bitterly as they joined the crowds descending the staircases back to the Great Hall and dinner. “That’ll take all weekend, that will. . . .”

“Lots of homework?” said Hermione brightly, catching up with them. “Professor Vector didn’t give *us* any at all!”

“Well, bully for Professor Vector,” said Ron moodily.

They reached the entrance hall, which was packed with people queuing for dinner. They had just joined the end of the line, when a loud voice rang out behind them.

“Weasley! Hey, Weasley!”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were standing there, each looking thoroughly pleased about something.

“What?” said Ron shortly.

“Your dad’s in the paper, Weasley!” said Malfoy, brandishing a copy of the *Daily Prophet* and speaking very loudly, so that everyone in the packed entrance hall could hear. “Listen to this!

FURTHER MISTAKES AT THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

It seems as though the Ministry of Magic’s troubles are not yet at an end, *writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent*. Recently under fire for its poor crowd control at the Quidditch World Cup, and still unable to account for the disappearance of one of its witches, the Ministry was plunged into fresh embarrassment yesterday by the antics of Arnold Weasley, of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office.”

Malfoy looked up.

“Imagine them not even getting his name right, Weasley. It’s almost as though he’s a complete nonentity, isn’t it?” he crowed.

Everyone in the entrance hall was listening now. Malfoy straightened the paper with a flourish and read on:

Arnold Weasley, who was charged with possession of a flying car two years ago, was yesterday involved in a tussle with several Muggle law-keepers (“policemen”) over a number of highly aggressive dustbins. Mr. Weasley appears to have rushed to the aid of “Mad-Eye” Moody, the aged ex-Auror who retired from the Ministry when no longer able to tell the difference between a handshake and attempted murder. Unsurprisingly, Mr. Weasley found, upon arrival at Mr. Moody’s heavily guarded house, that Mr. Moody had once again raised a false alarm. Mr. Weasley was forced to modify several memories before he could escape from the policemen, but refused to answer *Daily Prophet* questions about why he had involved the Ministry in such an undignified and potentially embarrassing scene.

“And there’s a picture, Weasley!” said Malfoy, flipping the paper over and holding it up. “A picture of your parents outside their house — if you can call it a house! Your mother could do with losing a bit of weight, couldn’t she?”

Ron was shaking with fury. Everyone was staring at him.

“Get stuffed, Malfoy,” said Harry. “C’mon, Ron. . . .”

“Oh yeah, you were staying with them this summer, weren’t you, Potter?” sneered Malfoy. “So tell me, is his mother really that porky, or is it just the picture?”

“You know *your* mother, Malfoy?” said Harry — both he and Hermione had grabbed the back of Ron’s robes to stop him from launching himself at Malfoy — “that expression she’s got, like she’s

got dung under her nose? Has she always looked like that, or was it just because you were with her?”

Malfoy’s pale face went slightly pink.

“Don’t you dare insult my mother, Potter.”

“Keep your fat mouth shut, then,” said Harry, turning away.

BANG!

Several people screamed — Harry felt something white-hot graze the side of his face — he plunged his hand into his robes for his wand, but before he’d even touched it, he heard a second loud BANG, and a roar that echoed through the entrance hall.

“OH NO YOU DON’T, LADDIE!”

Harry spun around. Professor Moody was limping down the marble staircase. His wand was out and it was pointing right at a pure white ferret, which was shivering on the stone-flagged floor, exactly where Malfoy had been standing.

There was a terrified silence in the entrance hall. Nobody but Moody was moving a muscle. Moody turned to look at Harry — at least, his normal eye was looking at Harry; the other one was pointing into the back of his head.

“Did he get you?” Moody growled. His voice was low and gravelly.

“No,” said Harry, “missed.”

“LEAVE IT!” Moody shouted.

“Leave — what?” Harry said, bewildered.

“Not you — him!” Moody growled, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at Crabbe, who had just frozen, about to pick up the white ferret. It seemed that Moody’s rolling eye was magical and could see

out of the back of his head.

Moody started to limp toward Crabbe, Goyle, and the ferret, which gave a terrified squeak and took off, streaking toward the dungeons.

“I don’t think so!” roared Moody, pointing his wand at the ferret again — it flew ten feet into the air, fell with a smack to the floor, and then bounced upward once more.

“I don’t like people who attack when their opponent’s back’s turned,” growled Moody as the ferret bounced higher and higher, squealing in pain. “Stinking, cowardly, scummy thing to do. . . .”

The ferret flew through the air, its legs and tail flailing helplessly.

“Never — do — that — again —” said Moody, speaking each word as the ferret hit the stone floor and bounced upward again.

“Professor Moody!” said a shocked voice.

Professor McGonagall was coming down the marble staircase with her arms full of books.

“Hello, Professor McGonagall,” said Moody calmly, bouncing the ferret still higher.

“What — what are you doing?” said Professor McGonagall, her eyes following the bouncing ferret’s progress through the air.

“Teaching,” said Moody.

“Teach — Moody, *is that a student?*” shrieked Professor McGonagall, the books spilling out of her arms.

“Yep,” said Moody.

“No!” cried Professor McGonagall, running down the stairs and pulling out her wand; a moment later, with a loud snapping noise, Draco Malfoy had reappeared, lying in a heap on the floor with his

sleek blond hair all over his now brilliantly pink face. He got to his feet, wincing.

“Moody, we *never* use Transfiguration as a punishment!” said Professor McGonagall weakly. “Surely Professor Dumbledore told you that?”

“He might’ve mentioned it, yeah,” said Moody, scratching his chin unconcernedly, “but I thought a good sharp shock —”

“We give detentions, Moody! Or speak to the offender’s Head of House!”

“I’ll do that, then,” said Moody, staring at Malfoy with great dislike.

Malfoy, whose pale eyes were still watering with pain and humiliation, looked malevolently up at Moody and muttered something in which the words “my father” were distinguishable.

“Oh yeah?” said Moody quietly, limping forward a few steps, the dull *clunk* of his wooden leg echoing around the hall. “Well, I know your father of old, boy. . . . You tell him Moody’s keeping a close eye on his son . . . you tell him that from me. . . . Now, your Head of House’ll be Snape, will it?”

“Yes,” said Malfoy resentfully.

“Another old friend,” growled Moody. “I’ve been looking forward to a chat with old Snape. . . . Come on, you. . . .”

And he seized Malfoy’s upper arm and marched him off toward the dungeons.

Professor McGonagall stared anxiously after them for a few moments, then waved her wand at her fallen books, causing them to soar up into the air and back into her arms.

“Don’t talk to me,” Ron said quietly to Harry and Hermione as they sat down at the Gryffindor table a few minutes later, surrounded by excited talk on all sides about what had just happened.

“Why not?” said Hermione in surprise.

“Because I want to fix that in my memory forever,” said Ron, his eyes closed and an uplifted expression on his face. “Draco Malfoy, the amazing bouncing ferret . . .”

Harry and Hermione both laughed, and Hermione began doling beef casserole onto each of their plates.

“He could have really hurt Malfoy, though,” she said. “It was good, really, that Professor McGonagall stopped it —”

“Hermione!” said Ron furiously, his eyes snapping open again, “you’re ruining the best moment of my life!”

Hermione made an impatient noise and began to eat at top speed again.

“Don’t tell me you’re going back to the library this evening?” said Harry, watching her.

“Got to,” said Hermione thickly. “Loads to do.”

“But you told us Professor Vector —”

“It’s not schoolwork,” she said. Within five minutes, she had cleared her plate and departed. No sooner had she gone than her seat was taken by Fred Weasley.

“Moody!” he said. “How cool is he?”

“Beyond cool,” said George, sitting down opposite Fred.

“Supercool,” said the twins’ best friend, Lee Jordan, sliding into the seat beside George. “We had him this afternoon,” he told Harry and Ron.

“What was it like?” said Harry eagerly.

Fred, George, and Lee exchanged looks full of meaning.

“Never had a lesson like it,” said Fred.

“He *knows*, man,” said Lee.

“Knows what?” said Ron, leaning forward.

“Knows what it’s like to be out there *doing* it,” said George impressively.

“Doing what?” said Harry.

“Fighting the Dark Arts,” said Fred.

“He’s seen it all,” said George.

“’Mazing,” said Lee.

Ron dived into his bag for his schedule.

“We haven’t got him till Thursday!” he said in a disappointed voice.

Maloog Moodie

Teen die volgende oggend is die storm uitgewoed, hoewel die plafon in die Groot Saal nog steeds oortrokke is; swaar pioutergrys wolke warrel bo hul koppe toe Harry, Ron en Hermien hul nuwe lesroosters aan die ontbyttafel bekyk. 'n Paar plekke verder is Fred, George en Lee Jordaan druk in gesprek oor towermaniere om hulself te verouder sodat hulle aan die Drietowenaarstoernooi kan deelneem.

“Vandag is nie sleg nie . . . die hele oggend buite,” sê Ron wat sy vinger teen Maandag se kolom op sy lesrooster aftrek, “Herbologie met die Hoesenproesers en Versorging van Magiese Kreature . . . verbrands, ons is nog steeds saam met die Slibberins . . .”

“Dubbele Waarsêery vanmiddag,” kreun Harry en lyk bedruk. Naas Towerdrankies is Waarsêery die vak waarvan hy die minste hou. Professor Trelawney is gedurig besig om Harry se dood te voorspel en hy vind dit besonder irriterend.

“Jy moes dit ook laat vaar het, soos ek,” sê Hermien beslis terwyl sy botter op haar roosterbrood smeer. “Dan het jy nou ook iets verstandigs soos Rekenmatiek gedoen.”

“Ek sien jy eet weer,” sê Ron terwyl hy kyk hoe Hermien 'n groot klomp klomp fyf op haar gebotterde roosterbrood smeer.

“Ek het besluit dat daar beter maniere is om standpunt oor elfregte in te neem,” sê Hermien uit die hoogte.

“Ja . . . en jy was honger ook,” sê Ron grinnikend.

Daar is 'n skielike ritselgeluid bo hulle en 'n honderd uile sweef deur die oop vensters met die oggend se pos. Harry kyk instinktief op, maar daar is nie 'n teken van iets wits tussen die massa bruin en grys nie. Die uile sirkel bo die tafels op soek na die mense aan wie die briewe en pakkies geadresseer is. 'n Groot geelbruin uil swiep oor Neville Loggerenberg en laat val 'n pakkie in sy skoot – Neville vergeet omtrent altyd iets by die huis. Aan die ander kant van die saal het Draco Malfoy se ooruil op sy skouer geland met iets wat soos sy gewone voorraad lekkers en koe-kies van die huis af lyk. Harry doen sy bes om die sinkende gevoel van teleurstelling in sy maag te ignoreer toe hy hom weer na sy pap wend. Is

dit moontlik dat iets met Hedwig gebeur het en dat Sirius nie sy brief gekry het nie?

Die hele ent pad met die deurweekte groentepaadjie langs tot by kweekhuis drie is hy afgetrokke, maar hier word sy aandag afgetrek deur professor Spruit wat vir die klas die lelikste plante wys wat Harry nog ooit gesien het. Hulle lyk inderdaad minder na plante as na reuse- dik swart naakslakke wat regop in die grond staan. Elkeen kriewel so effens en het 'n klomp groot blink swelsels wat skynbaar vol vloeistof is.

“Buileknolle,” sê professor Spruit kortaf. “Hulle moet uitgedruk word. Die etter moet in hierdie –”

“Die wat?” sê Septimus Floris en hy klink gewalg.

“Etter, Floris, etter,” sê professor Spruit, “en dit is uiters kosbaar, moet dit dus nie mors nie. Julle moet die etter in hierdie bottels versamel. Dra jul draakvelhandskoene; onverdunde Buileknol-etter kan snaakse dinge aan die vel doen.”

Om Buileknolle uit te druk, is regtig vieslik, maar ook vreemd bevredigend. Soos elke swelsel oopbars, loop 'n groot klomp dik geelgroen vloeistof, wat skerp na petrol ruik, daaruit. Hulle vang dit op in die bottels waarvan professor Spruit gepraat het en teen die einde van die les het hulle etlike liter bymekaargemaak.

“Dit sal Madame Pomfrey se hart bly maak,” sê professor Spruit toe sy 'n kurkprop in die laaste bottel druk. “Buile-etter is 'n uitstekende geneesmiddel vir die meer hardkoppige vorms van aknee. Behoort te keer dat studente desperate dinge doen om van hul puisies ontslae te raak.”

“Soos die arme Eloise Midgen,” sê Hanna Abbott, 'n Hoesenproeser, in 'n gedempte stem. “Sy't probeer om hare weg te vloek.”

“Verspotte kind,” sê professor Spruit kopskuddend. “Madame Pomfrey het haar neus op die ou end darem weer op sy plek vasgekry.”

'n Klok lui daverend vanuit die kasteel en eggo oor die nat terrein om die einde van die lesuur aan te kondig en die klas gaan uitmekaar; die Hoesenproesers klim die kliptrappe uit vir Transfigurasie en die Griffindors slaan 'n ander koers in, af met die helling na Hagrid se klein houthut wat op die kant van die Verbode Woud staan.

Hagrid staan buite sy hut met een hand op Tande, sy tamaai beerhond, se nekband. Verskeie houtkrate staan oop op die grond aan sy voete en Tande tjank en rem aan sy nekband, duidelik met die doel om die inhoud van naderby te ondersoek. Toe hulle nader kom, hoor hulle 'n vreemde ratelgeluid wat deur iets wat soos ligte ontploffings klink geaksentueer word.

“Môre!” groet Hagrid grinnikend vir Harry, Ron en Hermien. “Ons moet vir die Slibberins wag, hulle sal hierdie – hierdie Sputstertkrewels nie wil misloop nie!”

“Wat sê jy?” vra Ron.

Hagrid wys na een van die kratte.

“Êêg!” gil Hildegard Braun en spring agteruit.

Na Harry se mening som “Êêg” die Spuitstertkrewels baie mooi op. Hulle lyk soos misvormde, doplose krewes, aaklig bleek en slymerig, met pote op snaakse plekke en geen sigbare kop nie. Daar is omtrent ’n honderd van hulle in elke krat. Elkeen is sowat twaalf sentimeter lank en hulle kruip oor mekaar terwyl hulle blindweg teen die kante van die kratte vasloop. Hulle ruik sterk na vrot vis. Elke nou en dan skiet vonke uit die punt van ’n krewel, wat dan met ’n klein *foet*-geluidjie ’n hele ent vorentoe beweeg.

“Pas uitgebroei,” sê Hagrid trots, “julle sal hulle dus self kan grootmaak! Gedink ons kan so iets van ’n projek daarvan maak!”

“En hoekom sal ons hulle *wil* grootmaak?” sê ’n koue stem.

Die Slibberins het gearriveer. Die spreker is Draco Malfoy. Krabbe en Goliat giggel waarderend oor sy woorde.

Dit lyk asof Hagrid nie weet hoe om die vraag te beantwoord nie.

“Ek bedoel, wat *doen* hulle nou eintlik?” vra Malfoy. “Wat is die *punt* daarvan om hulle te wil aanhou?”

Hagrid maak sy mond oop, dis duidelik dat hy hard dink; vir ’n paar sekondes heers daar stilte, dan sê hy ruweg, “Dit is die volgende les, Malfoy. Vandag voer julle hulle net. Julle gaan allerhande goed op hulle uittoets – ek het nog nooit tevore van hulle gehad nie, is nie seker wat hulle eet nie – het miereiers en paddalewers en stukkie grasslang – probeer ’n ietsie van alles.”

“Eers etter en nou dit,” mompel Septimus.

Net hul diep gehegtheid aan Hagrid sorg dat Harry, Ron en Hermien slymerige hande vol paddalewer optel en oor die rand van die kratte laat sak om die Spuitstertkrewels mee te verlei. Harry sukkel om die spesmaas dat die hele oefening totaal sinneloos is, te onderdruk, want dit lyk of die krewels nie eens monde het nie.

“Eina!” gil Dean Thomas omtrent tien minute later. “Hy het my gebyt!”

Hagrid kom haastig nader. Hy lyk bekommerd.

“Die punt het ontplof!” sê Dean ergerlik en wys ’n brandmerk op sy hand vir Hagrid.

“O ja, dit kan gebeur wanneer hulle – h’m – spuit,” sê Hagrid kopknik-kend.

“Êêg!” sê Hildegard Braun weer. “Êêg, Hagrid, wat’s daardie punterige ding daar bo-op?”

“A, ja, party van hulle het angels,” sê Hagrid entoesiasties (Hildegard pluk haar hand vinnig uit die krat). “Ek dink hulle’s die mannetjies . . . die wyfies het ’n soort suier-affêre op hul mae . . . ek skat hulle gebruik dit om bloed mee te suig.”

“Wel, ek kan beslis insien hoekom ons hulle aan die lewe wil hou,” sê Malfoy sarkasties. “Wie wil nie ’n troeteldier hê wat jou kan brand, steek en byt alles tegelyk nie?”

“Net omdat hulle nie juis mooi is nie beteken nie noodwendig dat hulle nie ook nuttig kan wees nie,” jak Hermien hom af. “Drakebloed het ongelooflike towereienskappe, maar jy wil seker nie ’n draak vir ’n troeteldier hê nie, of hoe?”

Harry en Ron grinnik vir Hagrid wat skelm van agter sy woeste bosbaard lag. Daar is niks wat Hagrid so graag wil hê as ’n troeteldraak nie, dit weet Harry, Ron en Hermien alte goed. In hul eerste jaar het hy ’n geniepsige Noorweegse Rifrug met die naam Norbert vir ’n kort rukkie besit. Hagrid is dol op monsteragtige kreature – hoe dodeliker, hoe beter.

“Wel, ten minste is die krewels klein,” sê Ron toe hulle ’n uur later terug kasteel toe stap vir middagete.

“Hulle is *nou*,” sê Hermien in ’n ergerlike stem, “maar as Hagrid eers weet wat hulle eet, sal hulle seker twee meter lank word.”

“Wel, dit sal tog nie saak maak nie, solank hulle net uiteindelik gesiekte of so iets gesond kan maak, nie waar nie?” sê Ron en grynslag skelm vir haar.

“Jy weet baie goed dat ek dit net gesê het om Malfoy stil te kry,” sê Hermien. “As ek eerlik moet wees, moet ek met hom saamstem. Die beste ding om te doen is om daardie spul goed dood te trap voor hulle ons begin aanval.”

Hulle gaan sit by die Griffindortafel en help hulself aan lamtjops en kartappels. Hermien val dadelik weg en eet so vinnig dat Harry en Ron na haar staan.

“H’m – is dit die jongste posisie oor elfregte?” sê Ron. “Jy gaan jouself eerder laat opgooi of iets?”

“Nee,” sê Hermien met soveel waardigheid as wat iemand wie se kieste knop staan van die spruitjies maar kan hê. “Ek wil net by die biblioteek uitkom.”

“Wat?” sê Ron ongelowig. “Hermien – dis die eerste dag van die kwartaal! Ons het nog nie eens huiswerk nie!”

Hermien haal haar skouers op en gaan voort om haar kos te verorber asof sy dae laas iets geëet het. Toe spring sy orent en sê, “Sien julle vir aandete!” en laat spaander.

Toe die klok vir die middagklasse lui, sit Harry en Ron af na die Noordtoring waar ’n silwer trapleer aan die bopunt van ’n smal wenteltrap na ’n sirkelvormige valdeur in die plafon lei. In hierdie vertrek woon professor Trelawney.

Die bekende soet parfuim wat uit die vuur kom, vul hul neusgate toe hulle aan die bopunt van die trapleer kom. Soos altyd is al die gordyne toegetrek en die sirkelvormige vertrek is gebaai in ’n dowwe rooi gloed

wat kom van die vele lampe wat almal met serpe en sjaals toegegooi is. Harry en Ron loop verby 'n klomp stoele wat met sis oorgetrek is en poefs waarop mense reeds sit, en gaan sit by dieselfde sirkelvormige tafel as tevore.

"Goeiedag," sê die mistige stem van professor Trelawney reg agter Harry sodat hy wip.

Professor Trelawney is 'n baie maer vrou met enorme brilglase wat haar oë hopeloos te groot vir haar gesig laat lyk. Sy staar af na Harry met dieselfde tragiese uitdrukking wat sy altyd op haar gesig het wanneer sy na hom kyk. Sy dra die gewone hoeveelheid krale, kettings en armbande wat in die lig van die vuur glinster.

"Jy is afgetrokke, skat," sê sy droewig vir Harry. "My Innerlike Oog sien verby jou onverskrokke uiterlike na die rustelose siel daar binne. Dit spyt my om te moet sê dat jou bekommernisse nie ongegrond is nie. He-laa, ek sien dat moeilike tye vir jou voorlê . . . baie moeilik . . . ek is bevrees dat dit waarvoor jy bang is, inderdaad gaan gebeur . . . dalk gouer as wat jy voorsien . . ."

Haar stem het 'n blote fluistering geword. Ron rol sy oë vir Harry wat versteen terugkyk. Professor Trelawney gly verby hulle en gaan sit in 'n groot vleuelstoel voor die vuur sodat sy na die klas kyk. Hildegard Braun en Parvati Patel, wat professor Trelawney diep bewonder, sit baie na aan haar op twee poefs.

"My kinders, dit is tyd dat ons na die sterre kyk," sê sy. "Die beweging van die planeete en die geheimsinnige voortekens word slegs aan diegene geopenbaar wat die polsslag van die hemelse dans verstaan. Die mens se lotsbestemming kan ontsyfer word deur die planetêre strale vermeng met die . . ."

Harry se gedagtes raak weg. Die gekeurde vuur laat hom altyd sla-perig en swaar van begrip voel en professor Trelawney se onsamehan-gende praatjies oor fortuinvertellery het hom nog nooit eintlik geboei nie – hoewel hy nie anders kan as om te dink aan wat sy so pas vir hom gesê het nie. "Ek is bevrees dat dit waarvoor jy bang is, inderdaad gaan gebeur . . ."

Hermien is reg, dink Harry geïrriteerd, professor Trelawney is 'n regte ou kroek. Op die oomblik is daar hoegenaamd niks waarvoor hy bang is nie . . . wel, dis nou as 'n mens sy vrese dat Sirius gevang is buite reke-ning laat . . . maar wat weet professor Trelawney tog? Hy het lank gelede reeds besluit dat haar soort fortuinvertellery niks meer as raaiwerk en 'n spokerige houding is nie.

Behalwe natuurlik daardie keer aan die einde van die vorige kwartaal toe sy die voorspelling gemaak het dat Woldemort weer gaan verrys . . . toe het Dompeldorius self gesê dat hy haar beswyming as eg beskou nadat Harry dit vir hom beskryf het . . .

“Harry!” mompel Ron.

“Wat?”

Harry kyk om; die hele klas staar na hom. Hy sit vinnig regop. Hy het so ampertjies weggedommel, versonke in die hitte en in sy gedagtes.

“Ek het gesê, skat, dat dit duidelik is dat jy onder die noodlottige invloed van Saturnus gebore is,” sê professor Trelawney met ’n effens wrewelige klankie in haar stem omdat hy so duidelik nie aan haar lippe gehang het nie.

“Gebore onder – wat, ekskuus?” sê Harry.

“Saturnus, skat, die planeet Saturnus!” sê professor Trelawney en sy klink nou beslis gesteurd omdat hy nie diep deur hierdie tyding ontroer is nie. “Ek het gesê dat Saturnus gewis in ’n heersende posisie aan die hemeltrans was op die oomblik toe jy gebore is . . . jou donker hare . . . jou klein liggaamsbou . . . tragiese verliese so vroeg in jou lewe . . . Ek dink ek is reg, skat, as ek sê dat jy in die hartjie van die winter gebore is?”

“Nee,” sê Harry, “ek’s in Julie gebore.”

Ron sit sy lagbui vinnig om in ’n droë gehoes.

’n Halfuur later het elkeen van hulle ’n ingewikkelde kaart gekry en is hulle druk besig om die posisie van die planeet op die oomblik van hul geboorte in te teken. Dit is vervelige werk en hulle moet gedurig na tyd-tabelle verwys en hoeke bereken.

“Ek het twee Neptunusse hier,” sê Harry na ’n rukkie en hy frons vir sy stuk perkament, “dit kan seker nie reg wees nie, nè?”

“Aaaaa,” sê Ron in nabootsing van professor Trelawney se mistige fluisterstem, “wanneer twee Neptunusse aan die hemeltrans verskyn, is dit ’n seker teken dat ’n dwerg met ’n bril gebore is, Harry . . .”

Septimus en Dean wat daar naby werk, giggel hard, maar nie hard genoeg om Hildegard Braun se opgewonde krete te demp nie – “Oe, professor, kyk! Ek dink ek het ’n nieaspektiese planeet! Oeee, watter een is dit, professor?”

“Dit is Uranus, skat,” sê professor Trelawney terwyl sy na die kaart staar.

“Kan ek ook Uranus sien, Hildegard?” sê Ron.

Ongelukkig het professor Trelawney hom gehoor en dit is dalk hoekom sy aan die einde van die les soveel huiswerk vir hulle gee.

“n Uitvoerige ontleding van die wyse waarop die planetêre bewegings julle in die komende maand gaan beïnvloed met verwysing na jul persoonlike kaarte,” snou sy en klink baie meer soos professor McGonagall as na haar gewone verhewe self. “Dit moet Maandag klaar wees en geen verskonings sal aanvaar word nie!”

“Mislike feeks,” sê Ron bitter toe hulle by die skare aansluit wat met die trappe afstap Groot Saal toe vir aandete. “Dit sal die hele naweek neem, dis wat . . .”

“Baie huiswerk?” sê Hermien vrolik toe sy hulle inhaal. “Professor Vektor het niks vir ons gegee nie!”

“Wel, lekker vir professor Vektor,” sê Ron gebelg.

Hulle het die Ingangsportaal bereik. Dit wemel van mense wat tou staan vir aandete. Hulle het skaars agterin die tou gaan staan toe ’n harde stem agter hulle uitroep.

“Weasley! Haai, Weasley!”

Harry, Ron en Hermien draai om. Malfoy, Krabbe en Goliat staan daar en hulle lyk besonder in hul skik met hulself.

“Wat?” sê Ron kortaf.

“Jou pa’s in die koerant, Weasley!” sê Malfoy terwyl hy ’n eksemplaar van die *Daaglikse Profeet* rondswaai en baie hard praat sodat almal in die stampvol ingangsportaal hom kan hoor. “Luister ’n bietjie hierna!”

VERDERE FLATERS BY DIE MINISTERIE VIR TOWERKUNS

Dit lyk asof die moleste by die Ministerie vir Towerkuns nog nie tot ’n einde gekom het nie, skryf Rika Skinner, Spesiale Korrespondent. Die Ministerie, wat onlangs onder skoot was vir swak beheer oor die skares by die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker en nog steeds nie verslag kan doen oor die verdwyning van een van sy hekse nie, is opnuut in die verleentheid gedompel deur die streke van Arnold Weasley van die Kantoor vir die Misbruik van Moggelartefakte.

Malfoy kyk op.

“Hulle kry sowaar nie eens jou pa se naam reg nie, Weasley, dis nou nie juis of hy baie belangrik is nie, hè?” kraai hy.

Nou luister almal in die Ingangsportaal. Malfoy stryk die koerant met ’n swierige gebaar plat en gaan voort:

Arnold Weasley, wat twee jaar gelede aangekla is oor die besit van ’n vlieënde motor, was gister betrokke by ’n onderonsie met verskeie Moggelgeregsdiensmaats (“polisie”) oor ’n paar hoogs aggressiewe vullisdromme. Dit blyk dat mnr. Weasley vir “Maloog” Moodie, die bejaarde ex-Auror wat by die Ministerie bedank het toe hy nie meer tussen ’n gewone handdruk en ’n poging tot moord kon onderskei nie, te hulp gesnel het. By sy aankoms by mnr. Moodie se swaar bewaakte huis het mnr. Weasley egter besef dat mnr. Moodie weer eens ’n vals alarm gemaak het. Mnr. Weasley was genoodsaak om verskeie geheues te wysig voor hy van die polisie kon weghom, maar het geweier om die Daaglikse Profeet se vrae oor die redes waarom hy die Ministerie by so ’n onwaardige en potensieel embarrasserende toneel betrek het, te beantwoord.

"En hier's 'n foto, Weasley!" sê Malfoy toe hy die koerant omdraai en ophou. "'n Kiekie van jou ouers voor hul huis – dis nou as 'n mens dit 'n huis kan noem! Jou ma kan regtig 'n bietjie gewig verloor, of hoe?"

Ron bewee van woede. Almal staar na hom.

"Loop vlieg, Malfoy," sê Harry. "Komaan, Ron . . ."

"O ja, jy het mos hierdie vakansie by hulle gekuier, Potter, nie waar nie?" sê Malfoy honend. "Sê vir my, is sy ma regtig so dik, of is dit net die foto?"

"Jy weet, jou ma, nè, Malfoy?" sê Harry – sowel hy as Hermien het die agterkant van Ron se kleed vasgegryp om te keer dat hy Malfoy bespreek – "Daardie uitdrukking op haar gesig, so asof daar mis onder haar neus is? Het sy altyd so gelyk, of is dit net wanneer jy by haar is?"

Malfoy se bleek gesig word effens pienk. "Hoe durf jy my ma beledig, Potter!"

"Hou dan jou groot mond van ons af," sê Harry toe hy wegdraai.

BOEM!

Etlike mense skree – Harry voel iets witwarms die kant van sy gesig skroei – hy steek sy hand in sy kleed op soek na sy towerstaf, maar nog voor hy daaraan kan raak, hoor hy 'n tweede harde BOEM en 'n gebrul wat deur die ingangsportaal weergalm.

"O NEE, JY GAAN NIE, SEUNIE!"

Harry draai om. Professor Moodie kom hinkend met die marmertrappe af. Sy towerstaf is uit en dit is vol op 'n albino-muishond gerig wat bewend op die klipvloer staan presies waar Malfoy 'n oomblik gelede nog was.

Daar heers 'n verskrikte stilte in die Ingangsportaal. Niemand behalwe Moodie roer 'n spier nie. Moodie draai om en kyk na Harry – of liewer, sy normale oog kyk na Harry; die ander een wys na Moodie se agterkop.

"Het hy jou gekry?" grom Moodie. Sy stem is laag en skor.

"Nee," sê Harry, "dit was mis."

"LOS HOM!" skree Moodie.

"Los – wat?" sê Harry verwilderd.

"Nie jy nie – hy!" grom Moodie en wys met sy duim oor sy skouer na Krabbe wat op die punt was om die muishond op te tel, maar plotseling gevries het. Dit lyk asof Moodie se rollende oog betower is en deur sy agterkop kan sien.

Moodie hink na Krabbe, Goliat en die muishond wat 'n verskrikte piepgeluid maak en laat spaander na die kerkers.

"Ek dink nie so nie!" brul Moodie en weer rig hy sy towerstaf op die muishond – hy trek drie meter die lug in, val met 'n klapgeluid op die grond en bons dan weer op.

"Ek hou niks van mense wat aanval sodra hul opponent sy rug gedraai het nie," snou Moodie toe die muishond hoër en hoër bons en van pyn skree. "Stinkende, lafhartige, vrotsige ding om te doen . . ."

Die muishond vlieg deur die lug terwyl sy bene en stert hulpeloos rondswaai.

“Moet – dit – nooit – weer – doen – nie –” sê Moodie en met elke woord tref die muishond die grond en bons weer op.

“Professor Moodie!” sê ’n geskokte stem.

Professor McGonagall kom die marmertrappe af met haar arms vol boeke.

“Hallo, professor McGonagall,” sê Moodie bedaard terwyl hy die muishond nog hoër laat bons.

“Wat – wat doen jy?” sê professor McGonagall terwyl haar oë die bonssende muishond volg.

“Leer hom ’n les,” sê Moodie.

“’n Les – Moodie, is dit ’n student?” kryt professor McGonagall dit uit terwyl die boeke uit haar arms grond toe tuimel.

“Jip,” sê Moodie.

“Nee!” skree professor McGonagall. Sy hardloop met die trappe af ondertoe en trek haar towerstaf uit; ’n oomblik later, met ’n harde klapgeluid, lê Draco Malfoy in ’n hopie op die grond met sy gladde blonde hare oor sy gesig wat nou helderpienk is. Dan kom hy sidderend orent.

“Moodie, ons gebruik Transfigurasié *nooit* as straf nie!” sê professor McGonagall swakkies. “Professor Dompeldorius het dit darem seker vir jou gesê?”

“Hy mag dit genoem het, ja,” sê Moodie en vryf sy ken ongeërg, “maar ek het gedink dat ’n behoorlike skok –”

“Ons gee detensie, Moodie! Of ons praat met die hoof van die oortreder se huis!”

“Ek sal dit dan doen,” sê Moodie terwyl hy met intense weersin na Malfoy staar.

Malfoy, wie se bleek oë nog steeds van pyn en vernedering traan, kyk boosaardig op na Maloog en brom iets waarby die woorde “my pa” onderskei kan word.

“O ja?” sê Maloog gedemp en hink ’n paar tree nader sodat die dowwe *klonk* van sy houtbeen deur die portaal weerklink. “Wel, ek ken jou pa al lank, seun . . . jy kan vir hom sê dat Maloog ’n ogie oor sy seun hou . . . sê vir hom ek het so gesê . . . nou, die hoof van jou huis is Snerp, nie waar nie?”

“Ja,” sê Malfoy gegrief.

“Nog ’n ou vriend,” grom Maloog. “Ek sien al lankal uit na ’n geselsie met ou Snerp . . . komaan, jy . . .” Hy gryp Malfoy aan die boarm en stryk aan na die kerkers toe.

Professor McGonagall staar hulle vir ’n paar oomblikke bekommerd agterna, toe waai sy haar towerstaf oor die boeke wat op die grond lê sodat hulle die lug in styg en in haar arms beland.

“Moenie met my praat nie,” sê Ron saggies vir Harry en Hermien toe hulle ’n paar minute later by die Griffindortafel gaan sit, omring deur opgewonde gesprekke oor wat so pas gebeur het.

“Hoekom nie?” sê Hermien verbaas.

“Omdat ek dit vir ewig in my geheue wil vaslê,” sê Ron met geslote oë en ’n behaaglike uitdrukking op sy gesig. “Draco Malfoy, die ongelooflik bousende muishond . . .”

Sowel Harry as Hermien gaan aan die lag en Hermien begin om geïmagineerde beesvleis op elkeen se bord te skep.

“Hy kon Malfoy regtig seergemaak het,” sê sy. “Eintlik was dit goed dat McGonagall dit stopgesit het –”

“Hermien!” sê Ron vererg terwyl sy oë oopvlieg. “Jy ruineer die beste oomblik van my lewe!”

Hermien maak ’n ongeduldige geluid en val weer eens volstoom weg aan haar kos.

“Moenie vir my sê jy gaan vanaand al weer biblioteek toe nie,” sê Harry wat haar dophou.

“Moet,” sê Hermien deur ’n mond vol kos. “Het tonne om te doen.”

“Maar jy’t vir ons gesê dat professor Vektor –”

“Dis nie skoolwerk nie,” sê sy. Binne tien minute is haar bord leeg en is sy vort.

Sy het skaars opgestaan of haar plek word deur Fred Weasley ingeneem. “Moodie!” sê hy. “Hoe *cool* is hy nou eintlik?”

“Meer as *cool*,” sê George wat oorkant Fred gaan sit het.

“*Supercool*,” sê die tweeling se beste vriend, Lee Jordaan, toe hy in die plek langs George glip. “Ons het hom vanmiddag gehad,” vertel hy vir Harry en Ron.

“Hoe was dit?” vra Harry gretig.

Fred, George en Lee kyk betekenisvol na mekaar.

“Het nog nooit so iets belewe nie,” sê Fred.

“Hy weet, my ou,” sê Lee.

“Weet wat?” vra Ron wat vooroor leun.

“Weet hoe dit is om daar buite te wees en dinge te *doen*,” sê George gewigtig.

“Watse dinge?” vra Harry.

“Om die Donker Kunste te beveg,” sê Fred.

“Hy ken dit alles,” sê George.

“Ongelooflik,” sê Lee.

Ron duik in sy tas op soek na sy lesrooster.

“Ons het hom eers Donderdag!” sê hy in ’n teleurgestelde stem.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



THE UNFORGIVABLE CURSES

The next two days passed without great incident, unless you counted Neville melting his sixth cauldron in Potions. Professor Snape, who seemed to have attained new levels of vindictiveness over the summer, gave Neville detention, and Neville returned from it in a state of nervous collapse, having been made to disembowel a barrel full of horned toads.

“You know why Snape’s in such a foul mood, don’t you?” said Ron to Harry as they watched Hermione teaching Neville a Scouring Charm to remove the toad guts from under his fingernails.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Moody.”

It was common knowledge that Snape really wanted the Dark Arts job, and he had now failed to get it for the fourth year running. Snape had disliked all of their previous Dark Arts teachers, and shown it — but he seemed strangely wary of displaying overt animosity to Mad-Eye Moody. Indeed, whenever Harry saw the two of them together — at mealtimes, or when they passed in the corridors — he had the distinct impression that Snape was avoiding Moody’s eye, whether magical or normal.

“I reckon Snape’s a bit scared of him, you know,” Harry said thoughtfully.

“Imagine if Moody turned Snape into a horned toad,” said Ron, his eyes misting over, “and bounced him all around his dungeon. . . .”

The Gryffindor fourth years were looking forward to Moody’s first lesson so much that they arrived early on Thursday lunchtime and queued up outside his classroom before the bell had even rung. The only person missing was Hermione, who turned up just in time for the lesson.

“Been in the —”

“Library.” Harry finished her sentence for her. “C’mon, quick, or we won’t get decent seats.”

They hurried into three chairs right in front of the teacher’s desk, took out their copies of *The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection*, and waited, unusually quiet. Soon they heard Moody’s distinctive clunking footsteps coming down the corridor, and he entered the room, looking as strange and frightening as ever. They could just see his clawed, wooden foot protruding from underneath his robes.

“You can put those away,” he growled, stumping over to his desk and sitting down, “those books. You won’t need them.”

They returned the books to their bags, Ron looking excited.

Moody took out a register, shook his long mane of grizzled gray hair out of his twisted and scarred face, and began to call out names, his normal eye moving steadily down the list while his magical eye swiveled around, fixing upon each student as he or she answered.

“Right then,” he said, when the last person had declared themselves present, “I’ve had a letter from Professor Lupin about this class. Seems you’ve had a pretty thorough grounding in tackling Dark creatures — you’ve covered boggarts, Red Caps, hinkypunks, grindylows, Kappas, and werewolves, is that right?”

There was a general murmur of assent.

“But you’re behind — very behind — on dealing with curses,” said Moody. “So I’m here to bring you up to scratch on what wizards can do to each other. I’ve got one year to teach you how to deal with Dark —”

“What, aren’t you staying?” Ron blurted out.

Moody’s magical eye spun around to stare at Ron; Ron looked extremely apprehensive, but after a moment Moody smiled — the first time Harry had seen him do so. The effect was to make his heavily scarred face look more twisted and contorted than ever, but it was nevertheless good to know that he ever did anything as friendly as smile. Ron looked deeply relieved.

“You’ll be Arthur Weasley’s son, eh?” Moody said. “Your father got me out of a very tight corner a few days ago. . . . Yeah, I’m staying just the one year. Special favor to Dumbledore. . . . One year,

and then back to my quiet retirement.”

He gave a harsh laugh, and then clapped his gnarled hands together.

“So — straight into it. Curses. They come in many strengths and forms. Now, according to the Ministry of Magic, I’m supposed to teach you countercurses and leave it at that. I’m not supposed to show you what illegal Dark curses look like until you’re in the sixth year. You’re not supposed to be old enough to deal with it till then. But Professor Dumbledore’s got a higher opinion of your nerves, he reckons you can cope, and I say, the sooner you know what you’re up against, the better. How are you supposed to defend yourself against something you’ve never seen? A wizard who’s about to put an illegal curse on you isn’t going to tell you what he’s about to do. He’s not going to do it nice and polite to your face. You need to be prepared. You need to be alert and watchful. You need to put that away, Miss Brown, when I’m talking.”

Lavender jumped and blushed. She had been showing Parvati her completed horoscope under the desk. Apparently Moody’s magical eye could see through solid wood, as well as out of the back of his head.

“So . . . do any of you know which curses are most heavily punished by Wizarding law?”

Several hands rose tentatively into the air, including Ron’s and Hermione’s. Moody pointed at Ron, though his magical eye was still fixed on Lavender.

“Er,” said Ron tentatively, “my dad told me about one. . . . Is it called the Imperius Curse, or something?”

“Ah, yes,” said Moody appreciatively. “Your father *would* know that one. Gave the Ministry a lot of trouble at one time, the Imperius Curse.”

Moody got heavily to his mismatched feet, opened his desk drawer, and took out a glass jar. Three large black spiders were scuttling around inside it. Harry felt Ron recoil slightly next to him — Ron hated spiders.

Moody reached into the jar, caught one of the spiders, and held it in the palm of his hand so that they could all see it. He then pointed his wand at it and muttered, “*Imperio!*”

The spider leapt from Moody’s hand on a fine thread of silk and began to swing backward and forward as though on a trapeze. It stretched out its legs rigidly, then did a back flip, breaking the thread and landing on the desk, where it began to cartwheel in circles. Moody jerked his wand, and the spider rose onto two of its hind legs and went into what was unmistakably a tap dance.

Everyone was laughing — everyone except Moody.

“Think it’s funny, do you?” he growled. “You’d like it, would you, if I did it to you?”

The laughter died away almost instantly.

“Total control,” said Moody quietly as the spider balled itself up and began to roll over and over. “I could make it jump out of the window, drown itself, throw itself down one of your throats . . .”

Ron gave an involuntary shudder.

“Years back, there were a lot of witches and wizards being controlled by the Imperius Curse,” said Moody, and Harry knew he was talking about the days in which Voldemort had been all-

powerful. “Some job for the Ministry, trying to sort out who was being forced to act, and who was acting of their own free will.

“The Imperius Curse can be fought, and I’ll be teaching you how, but it takes real strength of character, and not everyone’s got it. Better avoid being hit with it if you can. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!” he barked, and everyone jumped.

Moody picked up the somersaulting spider and threw it back into the jar.

“Anyone else know one? Another illegal curse?”

Hermione’s hand flew into the air again and so, to Harry’s slight surprise, did Neville’s. The only class in which Neville usually volunteered information was Herbology, which was easily his best subject. Neville looked surprised at his own daring.

“Yes?” said Moody, his magical eye rolling right over to fix on Neville.

“There’s one — the Cruciatus Curse,” said Neville in a small but distinct voice.

Moody was looking very intently at Neville, this time with both eyes.

“Your name’s Longbottom?” he said, his magical eye swooping down to check the register again.

Neville nodded nervously, but Moody made no further inquiries. Turning back to the class at large, he reached into the jar for the next spider and placed it upon the desktop, where it remained motionless, apparently too scared to move.

“The Cruciatus Curse,” said Moody. “Needs to be a bit bigger for you to get the idea,” he said, pointing his wand at the spider.

“Engorgio!”

The spider swelled. It was now larger than a tarantula. Abandoning all pretense, Ron pushed his chair backward, as far away from Moody’s desk as possible.

Moody raised his wand again, pointed it at the spider, and muttered, *“Crucio!”*

At once, the spider’s legs bent in upon its body; it rolled over and began to twitch horribly, rocking from side to side. No sound came from it, but Harry was sure that if it could have given voice, it would have been screaming. Moody did not remove his wand, and the spider started to shudder and jerk more violently —

“Stop it!” Hermione said shrilly.

Harry looked around at her. She was looking, not at the spider, but at Neville, and Harry, following her gaze, saw that Neville’s hands were clenched upon the desk in front of him, his knuckles white, his eyes wide and horrified.

Moody raised his wand. The spider’s legs relaxed, but it continued to twitch.

“Reducio,” Moody muttered, and the spider shrank back to its proper size. He put it back into the jar.

“Pain,” said Moody softly. “You don’t need thumbscrews or knives to torture someone if you can perform the Cruciatus Curse. . . . That one was very popular once too.

“Right . . . anyone know any others?”

Harry looked around. From the looks on everyone’s faces, he guessed they were all wondering what was going to happen to the last spider. Hermione’s hand shook slightly as, for the third time, she

raised it into the air.

“Yes?” said Moody, looking at her.

“*Avada Kedavra*,” Hermione whispered.

Several people looked uneasily around at her, including Ron.

“Ah,” said Moody, another slight smile twisting his lopsided mouth. “Yes, the last and worst. *Avada Kedavra* . . . the Killing Curse.”

He put his hand into the glass jar, and almost as though it knew what was coming, the third spider scuttled frantically around the bottom of the jar, trying to evade Moody’s fingers, but he trapped it, and placed it upon the desktop. It started to scuttle frantically across the wooden surface.

Moody raised his wand, and Harry felt a sudden thrill of foreboding.

“*Avada Kedavra!*” Moody roared.

There was a flash of blinding green light and a rushing sound, as though a vast, invisible something was soaring through the air — instantaneously the spider rolled over onto its back, unmarked, but unmistakably dead. Several of the students stifled cries; Ron had thrown himself backward and almost toppled off his seat as the spider skidded toward him.

Moody swept the dead spider off the desk onto the floor.

“Not nice,” he said calmly. “Not pleasant. And there’s no countercurse. There’s no blocking it. Only one known person has ever survived it, and he’s sitting right in front of me.”

Harry felt his face redden as Moody’s eyes (both of them) looked into his own. He could feel everyone else looking around at him too.

Harry stared at the blank blackboard as though fascinated by it, but not really seeing it at all. . . .

So that was how his parents had died . . . exactly like that spider. Had they been unblemished and unmarked too? Had they simply seen the flash of green light and heard the rush of speeding death, before life was wiped from their bodies?

Harry had been picturing his parents' deaths over and over again for three years now, ever since he'd found out they had been murdered, ever since he'd found out what had happened that night: Wormtail had betrayed his parents' whereabouts to Voldemort, who had come to find them at their cottage. How Voldemort had killed Harry's father first. How James Potter had tried to hold him off, while he shouted at his wife to take Harry and run . . . Voldemort had advanced on Lily Potter, told her to move aside so that he could kill Harry . . . how she had begged him to kill her instead, refused to stop shielding her son . . . and so Voldemort had murdered her too, before turning his wand on Harry. . . .

Harry knew these details because he had heard his parents' voices when he had fought the dementors last year — for that was the terrible power of the dementors: to force their victims to relive the worst memories of their lives, and drown, powerless, in their own despair. . . .

Moody was speaking again, from a great distance, it seemed to Harry. With a massive effort, he pulled himself back to the present and listened to what Moody was saying.

“*Avada Kedavra*'s a curse that needs a powerful bit of magic behind it — you could all get your wands out now and point them at

me and say the words, and I doubt I'd get so much as a nosebleed. But that doesn't matter. I'm not here to teach you how to do it.

"Now, if there's no countercurse, why am I showing you? *Because you've got to know.* You've got to appreciate what the worst is. You don't want to find yourself in a situation where you're facing it. **CONSTANT VIGILANCE!**" he roared, and the whole class jumped again.

"Now . . . those three curses — *Avada Kedavra*, Imperius, and Cruciatus — are known as the Unforgivable Curses. The use of any one of them on a fellow human being is enough to earn a life sentence in Azkaban. That's what you're up against. That's what I've got to teach you to fight. You need preparing. You need arming. But most of all, you need to practice *constant, never-ceasing vigilance*. Get out your quills . . . copy this down. . . ."

They spent the rest of the lesson taking notes on each of the Unforgivable Curses. No one spoke until the bell rang — but when Moody had dismissed them and they had left the classroom, a torrent of talk burst forth. Most people were discussing the curses in awed voices — "Did you see it twitch?" — "and when he killed it — just like that!"

They were talking about the lesson, Harry thought, as though it had been some sort of spectacular show, but he hadn't found it very entertaining — and nor, it seemed, had Hermione.

"Hurry up," she said tensely to Harry and Ron.

"Not the ruddy library again?" said Ron.

"No," said Hermione curtly, pointing up a side passage. "Neville."

Neville was standing alone, halfway up the passage, staring at the

stone wall opposite him with the same horrified, wide-eyed look he had worn when Moody had demonstrated the Cruciatus Curse.

“Neville?” Hermione said gently.

Neville looked around.

“Oh hello,” he said, his voice much higher than usual. “Interesting lesson, wasn’t it? I wonder what’s for dinner, I’m — I’m starving, aren’t you?”

“Neville, are you all right?” said Hermione.

“Oh yes, I’m fine,” Neville gabbled in the same unnaturally high voice. “Very interesting dinner — I mean lesson — what’s for eating?”

Ron gave Harry a startled look.

“Neville, what — ?”

But an odd clunking noise sounded behind them, and they turned to see Professor Moody limping toward them. All four of them fell silent, watching him apprehensively, but when he spoke, it was in a much lower and gentler growl than they had yet heard.

“It’s all right, sonny,” he said to Neville. “Why don’t you come up to my office? Come on . . . we can have a cup of tea. . . .”

Neville looked even more frightened at the prospect of tea with Moody. He neither moved nor spoke. Moody turned his magical eye upon Harry.

“You all right, are you, Potter?”

“Yes,” said Harry, almost defiantly.

Moody’s blue eye quivered slightly in its socket as it surveyed Harry. Then he said, “You’ve got to know. It seems harsh, maybe, *but you’ve got to know*. No point pretending . . . well . . . come on,

Longbottom, I've got some books that might interest you."

Neville looked pleadingly at Harry, Ron, and Hermione, but they didn't say anything, so Neville had no choice but to allow himself to be steered away, one of Moody's gnarled hands on his shoulder.

"What was that about?" said Ron, watching Neville and Moody turn the corner.

"I don't know," said Hermione, looking pensive.

"Some lesson, though, eh?" said Ron to Harry as they set off for the Great Hall. "Fred and George were right, weren't they? He really knows his stuff, Moody, doesn't he? When he did *Avada Kedavra*, the way that spider just *died*, just snuffed it right —"

But Ron fell suddenly silent at the look on Harry's face and didn't speak again until they reached the Great Hall, when he said he supposed they had better make a start on Professor Trelawney's predictions tonight, since they would take hours.

Hermione did not join in with Harry and Ron's conversation during dinner, but ate furiously fast, and then left for the library again. Harry and Ron walked back to Gryffindor Tower, and Harry, who had been thinking of nothing else all through dinner, now raised the subject of the Unforgivable Curses himself.

"Wouldn't Moody and Dumbledore be in trouble with the Ministry if they knew we'd seen the curses?" Harry asked as they approached the Fat Lady.

"Yeah, probably," said Ron. "But Dumbledore's always done things his way, hasn't he, and Moody's been getting in trouble for years, I reckon. Attacks first and asks questions later — look at his dustbins. Balderdash."

The Fat Lady swung forward to reveal the entrance hole, and they climbed into the Gryffindor common room, which was crowded and noisy.

“Shall we get our Divination stuff, then?” said Harry.

“I s’pose,” Ron groaned.

They went up to the dormitory to fetch their books and charts, to find Neville there alone, sitting on his bed, reading. He looked a good deal calmer than at the end of Moody’s lesson, though still not entirely normal. His eyes were rather red.

“You all right, Neville?” Harry asked him.

“Oh yes,” said Neville, “I’m fine, thanks. Just reading this book Professor Moody lent me. . . .”

He held up the book: *Magical Water Plants of the Mediterranean*.

“Apparently, Professor Sprout told Professor Moody I’m really good at Herbology,” Neville said. There was a faint note of pride in his voice that Harry had rarely heard there before. “He thought I’d like this.”

Telling Neville what Professor Sprout had said, Harry thought, had been a very tactful way of cheering Neville up, for Neville very rarely heard that he was good at anything. It was the sort of thing Professor Lupin would have done.

Harry and Ron took their copies of *Unfogging the Future* back down to the common room, found a table, and set to work on their predictions for the coming month. An hour later, they had made very little progress, though their table was littered with bits of parchment bearing sums and symbols, and Harry’s brain was as fogged as

though it had been filled with the fumes from Professor Trelawney's fire.

"I haven't got a clue what this lot's supposed to mean," he said, staring down at a long list of calculations.

"You know," said Ron, whose hair was on end because of all the times he had run his fingers through it in frustration, "I think it's back to the old Divination standby."

"What — make it up?"

"Yeah," said Ron, sweeping the jumble of scrawled notes off the table, dipping his pen into some ink, and starting to write.

"Next Monday," he said as he scribbled, "I am likely to develop a cough, owing to the unlucky conjunction of Mars and Jupiter." He looked up at Harry. "You know her — just put in loads of misery, she'll lap it up."

"Right," said Harry, crumpling up his first attempt and lobbing it over the heads of a group of chattering first years into the fire. "Okay . . . on Monday, *I* will be in danger of — er — burns."

"Yeah, you will be," said Ron darkly, "we're seeing the skrewts again on Monday. Okay, Tuesday, *I'll* . . . erm . . ."

"Lose a treasured possession," said Harry, who was flicking through *Unfogging the Future* for ideas.

"Good one," said Ron, copying it down. "Because of . . . erm . . . Mercury. Why don't you get stabbed in the back by someone you thought was a friend?"

"Yeah . . . cool . . ." said Harry, scribbling it down, "because . . . Venus is in the twelfth house."

"And on Wednesday, I think I'll come off worst in a fight."

“Aaah, I was going to have a fight. Okay, I’ll lose a bet.”

“Yeah, you’ll be betting I’ll win my fight. . . .”

They continued to make up predictions (which grew steadily more tragic) for another hour, while the common room around them slowly emptied as people went up to bed. Crookshanks wandered over to them, leapt lightly into an empty chair, and stared inscrutably at Harry, rather as Hermione might look if she knew they weren’t doing their homework properly.

Staring around the room, trying to think of a kind of misfortune he hadn’t yet used, Harry saw Fred and George sitting together against the opposite wall, heads together, quills out, poring over a single piece of parchment. It was most unusual to see Fred and George hidden away in a corner and working silently; they usually liked to be in the thick of things and the noisy center of attention. There was something secretive about the way they were working on the piece of parchment, and Harry was reminded of how they had sat together writing something back at the Burrow. He had thought then that it was another order form for Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes, but it didn’t look like that this time; if it had been, they would surely have let Lee Jordan in on the joke. He wondered whether it had anything to do with entering the Triwizard Tournament.

As Harry watched, George shook his head at Fred, scratched out something with his quill, and said, in a very quiet voice that nevertheless carried across the almost deserted room, “No — that sounds like we’re accusing him. Got to be careful . . .”

Then George looked over and saw Harry watching him. Harry grinned and quickly returned to his predictions — he didn’t want

George to think he was eavesdropping. Shortly after that, the twins rolled up their parchment, said good night, and went off to bed.

Fred and George had been gone ten minutes or so when the portrait hole opened and Hermione climbed into the common room carrying a sheaf of parchment in one hand and a box whose contents rattled as she walked in the other. Crookshanks arched his back, purring.

“Hello,” she said, “I’ve just finished!”

“So have I!” said Ron triumphantly, throwing down his quill.

Hermione sat down, laid the things she was carrying in an empty armchair, and pulled Ron’s predictions toward her.

“Not going to have a very good month, are you?” she said sardonically as Crookshanks curled up in her lap.

“Ah well, at least I’m forewarned,” Ron yawned.

“You seem to be drowning twice,” said Hermione.

“Oh am I?” said Ron, peering down at his predictions. “I’d better change one of them to getting trampled by a rampaging hippogriff.”

“Don’t you think it’s a bit obvious you’ve made these up?” said Hermione.

“How dare you!” said Ron, in mock outrage. “We’ve been working like house-elves here!”

Hermione raised her eyebrows.

“It’s just an expression,” said Ron hastily.

Harry laid down his quill too, having just finished predicting his own death by decapitation.

“What’s in the box?” he asked, pointing at it.

“Funny you should ask,” said Hermione, with a nasty look at Ron.

She took off the lid and showed them the contents.

Inside were about fifty badges, all of different colors, but all bearing the same letters: S.P.E.W.

“‘Spew’?” said Harry, picking up a badge and looking at it. “What’s this about?”

“Not *spew*,” said Hermione impatiently. “It’s S-P-E-W. Stands for the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare.”

“Never heard of it,” said Ron.

“Well, of course you haven’t,” said Hermione briskly, “I’ve only just started it.”

“Yeah?” said Ron in mild surprise. “How many members have you got?”

“Well — if you two join — three,” said Hermione.

“And you think we want to walk around wearing badges saying ‘spew,’ do you?” said Ron.

“S-P-E-W!” said Hermione hotly. “I was going to put *Stop the Outrageous Abuse of Our Fellow Magical Creatures and Campaign for a Change in Their Legal Status* — but it wouldn’t fit. So that’s the heading of our manifesto.”

She brandished the sheaf of parchment at them.

“I’ve been researching it thoroughly in the library. Elf enslavement goes back centuries. I can’t believe no one’s done anything about it before now.”

“Hermione — open your ears,” said Ron loudly. “They. Like. It. They *like* being enslaved!”

“Our short-term aims,” said Hermione, speaking even more loudly than Ron, and acting as though she hadn’t heard a word, “are to

secure house-elves fair wages and working conditions. Our long-term aims include changing the law about non-wand use, and trying to get an elf into the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, because they're shockingly underrepresented."

"And how do we do all this?" Harry asked.

"We start by recruiting members," said Hermione happily. "I thought two Sickles to join — that buys a badge — and the proceeds can fund our leaflet campaign. You're treasurer, Ron — I've got you a collecting tin upstairs — and Harry, you're secretary, so you might want to write down everything I'm saying now, as a record of our first meeting."

There was a pause in which Hermione beamed at the pair of them, and Harry sat, torn between exasperation at Hermione and amusement at the look on Ron's face. The silence was broken, not by Ron, who in any case looked as though he was temporarily dumbstruck, but by a soft *tap, tap* on the window. Harry looked across the now empty common room and saw, illuminated by the moonlight, a snowy owl perched on the windowsill.

"Hedwig!" he shouted, and he launched himself out of his chair and across the room to pull open the window.

Hedwig flew inside, soared across the room, and landed on the table on top of Harry's predictions.

"About time!" said Harry, hurrying after her.

"She's got an answer!" said Ron excitedly, pointing at the grubby piece of parchment tied to Hedwig's leg.

Harry hastily untied it and sat down to read, whereupon Hedwig fluttered onto his knee, hooting softly.

“What does it say?” Hermione asked breathlessly.

The letter was very short, and looked as though it had been scrawled in a great hurry. Harry read it aloud:

Harry —

I'm flying north immediately. This news about your scar is the latest in a series of strange rumors that have reached me here. If it hurts again, go straight to Dumbledore — they're saying he's got Mad-Eye out of retirement, which means he's reading the signs, even if no one else is.

I'll be in touch soon. My best to Ron and Hermione. Keep your eyes open, Harry.

Sirius

Harry looked up at Ron and Hermione, who stared back at him.

“He’s flying north?” Hermione whispered. “He’s coming *back*?”

“Dumbledore’s reading what signs?” said Ron, looking perplexed.

“Harry — what’s up?”

For Harry had just hit himself in the forehead with his fist, jolting Hedwig out of his lap.

“I shouldn’t’ve told him!” Harry said furiously.

“What are you on about?” said Ron in surprise.

“It’s made him think he’s got to come back!” said Harry, now slamming his fist on the table so that Hedwig landed on the back of Ron’s chair, hooting indignantly. “Coming back, because he thinks I’m in trouble! And there’s nothing wrong with me! And I haven’t got

anything for you,” Harry snapped at Hedwig, who was clicking her beak expectantly, “you’ll have to go up to the Owlery if you want food.”

Hedwig gave him an extremely offended look and took off for the open window, cuffing him around the head with her outstretched wing as she went.

“Harry,” Hermione began, in a pacifying sort of voice.

“I’m going to bed,” said Harry shortly. “See you in the morning.”

Upstairs in the dormitory he pulled on his pajamas and got into his four-poster, but he didn’t feel remotely tired.

If Sirius came back and got caught, it would be his, Harry’s, fault. Why hadn’t he kept his mouth shut? A few seconds’ pain and he’d had to blab. . . . If he’d just had the sense to keep it to himself. . . .

He heard Ron come up into the dormitory a short while later, but did not speak to him. For a long time, Harry lay staring up at the dark canopy of his bed. The dormitory was completely silent, and, had he been less preoccupied, Harry would have realized that the absence of Neville’s usual snores meant that he was not the only one lying awake.

Die Onvergeeflike Vloeke

Die volgende twee dae verloop sonder enige noemenswaardige voorvalle, behalwe as 'n mens Neville se sesde gesmelte heksekettel in die Tower-drankie-klas tel. Professor Snerp, wie se haatdraendheid tydens die somervakansie nuwe hoogtes bereik het, gee vir Neville detensie en toe hy terugkom, is hy op die rand van 'n senu-ineenstorting nadat hy 'n hele vaatjie vol horingpaddas se ingewande moes uithaal.

“Jy weet seker hoekom Snerp in so 'n vieslike bui is, hè?” sê Ron vir Harry terwyl hulle kyk hoe Hermien vir Neville 'n Skroptowerspreuk leer om die derms onder sy vingernaels mee uit te haal.

“Jip,” sê Harry. “Moodie.”

Dit is algemene kennis dat Snerp graag die Donker Kunste-pos wou hê en dis nou al die vierde agtereenvolgende jaar dat hy dit nie gekry het nie. Snerp het niks van al die vorige onderwysers vir die Donker Kunste gehou nie én dit gewys – maar dis of hy vreemd versigtig is om openlik vyandig teenoor Maloog Moodie te wees. Om die waarheid te sê, nog elke keer dat Harry die twee saam sien – tydens maaltye of wanneer hulle in die gange verby mekaar stap – kry hy 'n duidelike indruk dat Snerp Moodie se oë vermy, die magiese oog sowel as die normale een.

“Ek dink Snerp is 'n bietjie skrikkerig vir hom, weet jy,” sê Harry peinsend.

“Sê nou Moodie verander Snerp in 'n horingpadda,” sê Ron en sy oë word glasisg, “en dan laat hy hom oral in sy kerker rondbons . . .”

Griffindor se vierdejaars sien so baie na Moodie se eerste les uit dat hulle daardie Donderdag net na middagete al voor sy klaskamer toudaan, selfs nog voor die klok gelui het.

Die enigste persoon wat nie daar is nie, is Hermien, wat net betyds vir die les opdaag.

“Was in die –”

“– biblioteek,” voltooi Harry haar sin vir haar. “Komaan, maak gou, anders kry ons nie lekker plekke nie.”

Hulle haas hulle na drie stoele reg voor die onderwyser se tafel, haal hul eksemplare van *Die Donker Magte: 'n Gids tot Selfbeskerming* uit en

wag in 'n ongewone stilte. Spoedig hoor hulle Moodie se kenmerkende klonkende voetstappe in die gang en toe hy die vertrek binnekom, lyk hy net so vreemd en skrikwekkend as ooit. Hulle kan sy houtbeen en klou net-net onder sy kleed sien uitsteek.

“Julle kan dit maar wegsit,” grom hy toe hy na sy tafel strompel en gaan sit, “daardie boeke. Julle het hulle nie nodig nie.”

Hulle sit die boeke terug in hul tasse en Ron lyk opgewonde.

Moodie haal 'n register uit, skud sy lang grys maanhaar uit sy verwronge en geskende gesig en begin almal se name uitroep. Sy normale oog beweeg al met die lys af terwyl sy magiese oog ronddraai en na elke student staar soos hy of sy antwoord.

“So ja,” sê hy toe die laaste persoon hom teenwoordig verklaar het, “ek het 'n brief van professor Lupin oor hierdie klas gehad. Dit lyk asof julle baie deeglik onderrig is in hoe om Donker kreature te takel – julle het Boggarts, Rooikappies, Hinkepinke, Grindeloë, Kappas en weerwolwe gedoen, is dit reg?”

Daar is 'n instemmende gebrom.

“Maar julle is agter – baie ver agter – wanneer dit by die hantering van vloeke kom,” sê Moodie. “Dus is ek hier om julle op datum te bring met wat towenaars aan mekaar kan doen. Ek het een jaar om julle te leer hoe om met Donker –”

“Wat, dan gaan u nie aanbly nie?” blaker Ron dit uit.

Moodie se magiese oog draai om en staar na Ron; Ron lyk baie skrikkerig, maar dan glimlag Moodie – die eerste keer dat Harry hom dit sien doen. Dit laat sy swaar geskende gesig nog meer vertrek en verwronge as tevore lyk, maar dit is 'n verligting om te weet dat hy wel iets vriendeliks doen soos om te glimlag. Ron lyk besonder verlig.

“Jy is Arthur Weasley se seun, nè?” sê Moodie. “Jou pa het my 'n dag of wat gelede uit die penarie gehelp . . . Ja, ek bly net die een jaar. Spesiale guns vir Dompeldorius . . . een jaar en dan weer terug na my stil, afgetrede lewe.”

Hy uiter 'n skor lag en klap dan sy knoesterige hande teen mekaar.

“Laat ons begin. Vloeke. Hulle kom in baie sterktes en gedaantes. Volgens die Ministerie vir Towerkuns is ek veronderstel om vir julle teenvloeke te leer en klaar gelag. Ek is nie veronderstel om vir julle te wys hoe die onwettige Donker vloeke lyk voor julle nie in jul sesde jaar is nie. Julle is glo nie oud genoeg om dit voor daardie tyd te kan hanteer nie. Professor Dompeldorius dink egter jul senuwees is sterker as dit, hy reken julle is opgewasse vir die taak en ek sê ook dat hoe gouer 'n mens weet waarteen jy te staan kan kom, hoe beter. Hoe kan jy jouself teen iets verdedig as jy dit nog nooit eens gesien het nie? 'n Towenaar wat 'n onwettige vloek oor jou wil uitspreek, gaan nie vir jou sê wat hy gaan doen nie. Hy gaan nie ewe hoflik en vriendelik daaromtrent wees nie. Jy moet

paraat wees. Jy moet wakker en op jou hoede wees. Jy moet daardie ding wegsit, juffrou Braun, as ek praat.”

Hildegard wip en bloos. Sy het haar voltooide horoskoop onder die tafel vir Parvati gewys. Moodie se magiese oog kan klaarblyklik deur so-
liede hout sien sowel as deur sy agterkop.

“Dus . . . is daar enige van julle wat weet watter vloeke die swaarste deur die towenaarswette gestraf word?”

Verskeie hande word huiwerig opgesteek, insluitende Ron en Hermien s’n. Moodie wys na Ron, hoewel sy magiese oog nog na Hildegard kyk.

“H’m,” sê Ron aarselend, “my pa het my van een vertel . . . dit word die Imperiusvloek genoem, of so iets.”

“A, ja,” sê Moodie goedkeurend. “Jou pa sal daardie een ken. Het die Ministerie in ’n stadium baie probleme gegee, daardie Imperiusvloek.”

Moodie kom swaar orent, maak sy laai oop en haal ’n glasfles uit. Drie groot swart spinnekoppe skarrel binne-in rond. Harry voel hoe Ron ef-
fens langs hom terugdeins – Ron haat spinnekoppe.

Moodie steek sy hand in die fles, vang een van die spinnekoppe en hou dit op die palm van sy hand sodat hulle dit kan sien.

Dan rig hy sy towerstaf daarop en mompel, “*Imperio!*”

Die spinnekop spring van Moodie se hand af, hang aan ’n dun sydraad en begin om heen en weer te swaai asof hy aan ’n sweefstok hang. Toe steek hy sy pote stokstyf uit, slaan agteroor bollemakiesie sodat die draad breek en land op die lessenaar waar hy wawiele begin doen. Moodie lig sy towerstaf en die spinnekop gaan staan op twee van sy agterpote en doen ’n onmiskenbare klopdans.

Almal lag – almal behalwe Moodie.

“Dink dis snaaks, nè?” grom hy. “Julle sal daarvan hou as ek dit aan julle doen, nè?”

Die gelag droog feitlik onmiddellik op.

“Totale beheer,” sê Moodie onverstoord terwyl die spinnekop in ’n bal-
letjie rol en om en om bollemakiesie slaan. “Ek kan hom dwing om deur ’n venster te spring, om homself te verdrink, om in een van julle kele af te spring . . .”

Ron sidder onwillekeurig.

“Jare gelede was daar baie hekse en towenaars wat deur die Imperius-
vloek beheer is,” sê Moodie en Harry weet dat hy van die dae praat toe Woldemort op die kruin van sy mag was. “Die Ministerie het omtrent ’n taak gehad om uit te werk wie gedwing was en wie uit vrye wil gehandel het.

“Die Imperiusvloek kan beveg word en ek gaan julle leer hoe, maar dit verg ware sterkte van karakter; almal het dit nie. As jy enigsins kan, is dit beter om te sorg dat dit jou nie tref nie. VOORTDURENDE WAAK-SAAMHEID!” bulder hy sodat almal wip van die skrik.

Moodie tel die spinnekop op wat nog steeds wawiele maak en gooi dit terug in die fles. "Ken enigeen nog iets anders? Nog 'n onwettige vloek?"

Hermien se hand vlieg weer die lug in en so ook, tot Harry se verbaasings, Neville s'n. Die enigste klas waar Neville ooit iets sê, is Herbologie, wat verreweg sy beste vak is. Neville lyk self effens verbaas oor hierdie waagstuk.

"Ja?" sê Moodie en sy magiese oog rol om en staar na Neville.

"Daar's een – die Cruciatusvloek," sê Neville in 'n klein maar helder stemmetjie.

Moodie kyk baie intens na Neville, hierdie keer met albei oë.

"Jou naam is Loggerenberg?" sê hy en sy magiese oog swiep af na die register.

Neville knik senuagtig, maar Moodie vra geen verdere vrae nie. Hy draai terug na die res van die klas, haal nog 'n spinnekop uit en sit dit op die lessenaar neer waar dit bewegingloos bly lê, nes of dit bang is om te roer.

"Die Cruciatusvloek," sê Moodie. "Moet eintlik 'n rapsie groter wees sodat julle behoorlik kan sien," sê hy en rig sy towerstaf op die spinnekop. "Engorgio!"

Die spinnekop begin swel. Dit is nou groter as 'n tarantula. Ron probeer nie eens voorgee nie; hy stoot sy stoel terug tot dit so ver moontlik van Moodie se lessenaar af is.

Weer lig Moodie sy towerstaf. Hy rig dit op die spinnekop en mompel, "Crucio!"

Onmiddellik trek die spinnekop sy pote styf teen sy liggaam saam; dit rol om en begin aaklig ruk terwyl dit heen en weer wieg. Dit maak nie 'n geluid nie, maar Harry is seker dat dit sou skree as dit maar net kon. Moodie neem nie sy towerstaf weg nie en die spinnekop begin om nog erger te sidder en te beef.

"Hou op!" sê Hermien skril.

Harry kyk om na haar. Sy kyk nie na die spinnekop nie, maar na Neville, en toe Harry haar blik volg, sien hy dat Neville se hande styf op die lessenaar voor hom saamgekleem is sodat sy kneukels wit en sy oë groot en verskrik is.

Moodie lig sy towerstaf. Die spinnekop se bene verslap, maar dit ruk nog steeds.

"Reducio!" mompel Moodie en die spinnekop krimp terug tot sy gewone grootte. Hy sit dit terug in die fles.

"Pyn," sê Moodie sag. "Jy het nie duimskroewe of messe nodig om iemand mee te martel as jy die Cruciatusvloek ken nie . . . hierdie een was ook voorheen baie gewild.

"Goed . . . ken enigiemand enige van die ander?"

Harry kyk rond. Van die uitdrukkings op almal se gesigte lei hy af dat almal wonder wat met die laaste spinnekop gaan gebeur. Hermien se hand skud liggies toe sy dit vir die derde keer opsteek.

“Ja?” sê Moodie en kyk na haar.

“*Avada Kedavra*,” fluister Hermien.

Verskeie mense, insluitend Ron, kyk onrustig na haar.

“A,” sê Moodie en nog ’n effense glimlaggie trek aan sy skewe mond “Ja, die laaste en die ergste. *Avada Kedavra* . . . die doodsvloek.”

Hy steek sy hand in die glasfles en die derde spinnekop skarrel verwilderd op die bodem rond in ’n poging om Moodie se vingers te vemy – nes of dit weet wat op hom wag. Moodie pen hom egter vas en sit hom op die lessenaar neer waar hy benoud op die houtoppervlak begin rondhardloop.

Moodie lig sy towerstaf en Harry ervaar ’n skielike gevoel van benoude afwagting.

“*Avada Kedavra!*” brul Moodie.

Daar is ’n verblindende groen ligstraal en ’n suisgeluid asof ’n yslike, onsigbare iets deur die lug trek – die spinnekop rol oombliklik om op sy rug, ongeskaad, maar onmiskienbaar dood. Etlike van die meisies onderdruk krete; Ron het wild teruggedeins en val amper bo van sy stoel af toe die spinnekop na hom toe skuiwe.

Moodie vee die dooie spinnekop van sy lessenaar af op die vloer.

“Nie mooi nie,” sê hy bedard. “Nie aangenaam nie. En daar is geen teenvloek nie. Dit kan op geen manier geblokkeer word nie. Net een persoon het dit nog ooit oorleef en hy sit hier reg voor my.”

Harry voel hoe sy gesig rooi word toe Moodie se oë (albei van hulle) in syne boor. Hy kan voel dat al die ander ook na hom kyk. Harry staar na die swartbord asof hy daardeur gefassineer is, maar sonder om regtig enigiets te sien . . .

Dit is dan hoe sy ouers dood is . . . presies soos daardie spinnekop. Was hulle ook op die oog af ongedeerd en sonder letsels? Het hulle bloot ’n groen ligstraal gesien en die gesuis van die dood voor die lewe uit hul liggame gewis is?

Gedurende die afgelope drie jaar het Harry hom sy ouers se dood al oor en oor voorgestel, sedert hy die eerste keer gehoor het dat hulle vermoor is, sedert hy uitgevind het wat daardie nag gebeur het: hoe Wurmstert sy ouers se geheime verblyf aan Woldemort verrai het en hoe hy hulle in hul kothuis vermoor het. Hoe Woldemort eers Harry se pa doodgemaak het. Hoe James Potter probeer het om hom af te weer terwyl hy vir sy vrou geskree het om vir Harry te gryp en te maak dat sy wegkom . . . hoe Woldemort hom na Lily Potter gewend het, haar beveel het om opsy te staan sodat hy vir Harry kan doodmaak . . . hoe sy hom gesmeek het om haar eerder te vermoor en volgehou het om haar seun te beskerm

... en so het Woldemort haar ook doodgemaak voor hy sy towerstaf op Harry gerig het . . .

Harry ken al hierdie besonderhede, want hy het sy ouers se stemme gehoor toe hy die vorige jaar teen die Dementors geveg het – want *dit* is die vreeslike mag van die Dementors: dat hulle hul slagoffer dwing om die ergste herinnerings van sy lewe te herleef tot hy in sy eie wanhoop verdrink . . .

Moodie praat weer en dit voel vir Harry asof dit van baie ver af kom. Met 'n geweldige kraginspanning dwing hy homself terug na die hede en om na Moodie te luister.

“Avada Kedavra is 'n vloek waaragter 'n kragtige stuk towery skuil – julle kan almal jul towerstawwe uithaal en op my rig en ek twyfel of julle selfs my neus sal laat bloei. Dit is egter nie ter sake nie. Ek is nie hier om julle te leer hoe om dit te doen nie.

“Nou, as daar geen teenvloek is nie, hoekom wys ek dit vir julle? *Omdat julle moet weet.* Julle moet juis self die ergste kan voorstel. Julle wil juis self nie in 'n situasie bevind waar *dit* julle in die oog staar nie. VOORTDURENDE WAAKSAAMHEID!” brul hy en weer eens wip die hele klas van die skrik.

“Nou . . . hierdie drie vloeke – Avada Kedavra, Imperius en Cruciatius – staan as die Onvergeeflike Vloeke bekend. Die gebruik van enige van hulle op 'n medemens is genoeg om tot 'n lewenslange vonnis in Azkaban te lei. Dis waarteen julle te staan kom. Dis wat ek julle moet leer beveg. Maar bowenal moet julle *voortdurende, gedurige waaksaamheid* beoefen. Haal jul veerpenne uit . . . skryf die volgende neer . . .”

Vir die res van die lesuur maak hulle aantekeninge oor elkeen van die Onvergeeflike Vloeke. Tot die klok lui, sê niemand 'n woord nie – maar nadat Moodie hulle laat verdaag het en hulle by die klas uit is, bars 'n woordevloed los. Die meeste bespreek die vloeke in verskrikte stemme – “Het julle gesien hoe hy ruk?” “– en hoe hy hom doodgemaak het – sommer net so!”

Hulle praat oor die les, dink Harry, asof dit die een of ander wonderlike vertoning was, maar vir hom was dit glad nie vermaaklik nie – en ook nie, so lyk dit, vir Hermien nie.

“Maak gou,” sê sy gespanne vir Harry en Ron.

“Tog nie al weer die simpele ou biblioteek nie?” sê Ron.

“Nee,” sê Hermien kortaf en wys na 'n dwarsgang. “Neville.”

Neville staan heeltemal alleen halfpad op met die gang en staar na die klipmuur oorkant hom met dieselfde geskokte, grootogige uitdrukking op sy gesig soos toe Moodie die Cruciatusvloek gedemonstreer het.

“Neville?” sê Hermien sag.

Neville kyk om.

“O, hallo,” sê hy en sy stem is baie hoër as gewoonlik. “Interessante

les, nè? Ek wonder wat daar vir aandete is, ek – ek's dood van die honger, en julle?"

"Neville, is alles reg?" vra Hermien.

"O ja, ek makeer niks," babbel Neville in dieselfde onnatuurlik hoë stem. "Baie interessante aandete – ek bedoel les – wat's daar om te eet?"

'n Onewe klonkgeluid klink agter hulle op, en toe hulle omdraai, sien hulle dat professor Moodie hinkend aangestap kom. Al vier van hulle word stil en hou hom bedug dop, maar toe hy praat, is dit met 'n heel-wat laer en sagter gegrom as voorheen.

"Dis alles reg, seun," sê hy vir Neville. "Hoekom kom jy nie saam na my kantoor toe nie? Komaan . . . ons kan 'n koppie tee drink . . ."

By die gedagte aan tee saam met professor Moodie lyk Neville nog meer vreesbevange. Hy praat of roer nie.

Moodie draai sy magiese oog na Harry. "Alles reg, Potter?"

"Ja," sê Harry amper uitdagend.

Moodie se blou oog tril so ietwat in sy oogholte toe dit na Harry kyk.

Toe sê hy, "Julle moet weet. Dit lyk dalk erg, *maar julle moet weet*. Daar is geen sin daarin om voor te gee . . . wel . . . Komaan, Loggerenberg, ek het 'n paar boeke wat jou mag interesseer."

Neville kyk pleitend na Harry, Ron en Hermien, maar hulle reageer nie. Een van Moodie se knoetselige hande rus op sy skouer, dus het Neville geen keuse as om hom te laat weglei nie.

"Wat beteken dit?" sê Ron terwyl hy kyk hoe Neville en Moodie om die hoek verdwyn.

"Ek weet nie," sê Hermien en sy lyk peinsend.

"Dit was 'n les en 'n half, nè," sê Ron vir Harry toe hulle na die Groot Saal toe stap. "Fred en George was reg, of hoe? Hy weet wat hy doen, daardie Moodie, of wat sê jy? Toe hy daardie Avada Kedavra doen en daardie spinnekop net eenvoudig *vrek*, net so neerslaan –"

Ron word egter plotseling stil toe hy die trek op Harry se gesig sien en hy praat eers weer toe hulle die Groot Saal bereik, waar hy sê dat hulle daardie aand met professor Trelawney se voorspellings sal moet begin omdat dit ure sal neem.

Tydens die aandete neem Hermien nie aan Harry en Ron se gesprek deel nie. Sy eet verskriklik vinnig en gaan daarna weer biblioteek toe. Harry en Ron stap terug na die Griffindortoring en Harry, wat die hele tyd aan tafel aan niks anders gedink het nie, roer nou die onderwerp van die Onvergeeflike Vloeke aan.

"Sal Moodie en Dompeldorius nie moeilikheid by die Ministerie kry as hulle moet weet dat ons die vloeke gesien het nie?" vra Harry toe hulle by die Vet Vrou kom.

"Seker, ja," sê Ron, "maar Dompeldorius doen alles nog altyd op sy eie manier en Moodie is al vir jare gedurig in die moeilikheid, dink ek."

Val eers aan en vra later vrae – soos met sy vullisdromme. Spekskiet.”

Die Vet Vrou swaai vorentoe en die ingang word sigbaar. Hulle klim tot in die Griffindor-geleskamer wat stampvol en raserig is.

“Sal ons ons Waarsêgoed gaan haal?” vra Harry.

“Seker maar,” kreun Ron.

Hulle gaan op na die slaapsaal om hul boeke en kaarte te kry, en sien vir Neville daar, heeltemal alleen, op sy bed sit en lees. Hy lyk baie meer bedaard as aan die einde van Moodie se les, maar hy is nog steeds nie sy ou self nie. Sy oë is nogal rooi.

“Is jy oukei, Neville?” vra Harry vir hom.

“O ja,” sê Neville, “ek makeer niks nie, dankie. Lees net hierdie boek wat professor Moodie vir my geleen het . . .”

Hy hou die boek op: *Magiese Mediterreense Waterplante en Hul Eienskappe*.

“Blykbaar het professor Spruit vir professor Moodie gesê dat ek nogal goed in Herbologie is,” sê Neville. Daar is ’n sweem van trots in sy stem wat Harry nog min tevore gehoor het. “Hy het gedink ek sal hiervan hou.”

Om vir Neville te sê wat professor Spruit gesê het, dink Harry, is ’n taktvolle manier om Neville op te beur, want Neville hoor maar selde dat hy in iets goed is. Dit is die soort ding wat professor Lupin ook sou gedoen het.

Harry en Ron neem hul eksemplare van *Ontnewel die Toekoms* terug na die geselskamer, kry ’n tafel en begin om aan hul voorspellings vir die komende maand te werk. ’n Uur later het hulle nog maar min vordering gemaak, hoewel hul tafel vol stukkies perkament met berekenings en simbole op is en Harry se brein net so benewel is soos wanneer hy in die dampe gesit het wat van professor Trelawney se vuur af kom.

“Ek het nie ’n idee wat dit alles kastig beteken nie,” sê hy en staar na ’n lang lys berekenings.

“Weet jy,” sê Ron wie se hare orent staan van al die kere dat hy sy vingers uit frustrasie daardeur getrek het. “Ek dink dis terug na ons ou Waarsêery-staatmaker.”

“Wat – dit *opmaak*?”

“H’m,” sê Ron toe hy die warboel gekrabbelde notas van die tafel af-vee, sy pen in die inkt doop en begin skryf.

“Volgende Maandag,” sê hy terwyl hy skryf, “gaan ek heel waarskynlik ’n hoes ontwikkel weens die ongelukkige konjunksie van Mars en Jupiter.” Hy kyk op na Harry. “Jy ken haar – skryf net allerhande ellendes neer, sy’s mal daaroor.”

“Goed,” sê Harry terwyl hy sy eerste poging opfrommel en oor die koppe van ’n groepie geselsende eerstejaars in die vuur gooi. “Oukei . . . op Maandag sal ek in gevaar wees van – h’m – brandwonde.”

“Ja, jy sal,” sê Ron dreigend, “ons sien daardie krewels weer Maandag. Oukei, op Dinsdag sal ek . . . h’m . . .”

“’n Kosbare besitting verloor,” sê Harry wat besig is om deur *Ontnewel die Toekoms* te blaai op soek na idees.

“Mooi skoot,” sê Ron en skryf dit neer. “As gevolg van . . . h’m . . . Mercurius. Hoekom word jy nie in die rug gesteeek deur iemand wat jy as ’n vriend beskou het nie?”

“Ja . . . cool . . .” sê Harry en skryf dit ook neer, “omdat . . . omdat Venus in die twaalfde huis is.”

“En Woensdag, dink ek, gaan ek in ’n bakleiery die slegste daarvan afkom.”

“T’aag, ek wou baklei het. Oukei, ek sal ’n weddenskap verloor.”

“Ja, jy’t gewed dat ek die geveg sal wen . . .”

Op hierdie trant gaan hulle vir nog ’n uur voort om voorspellings op te maak wat algaande al tragieser word terwyl die geselskamer om hulle stadigaan leegloop soos die mense bed toe begin gaan. Kromskeen kom nader en wip ligvoets op ’n leë stoel terwyl hy stip na Harry staar, baie soos Hermien wanneer sy weet dat hulle nie hul huiswerk behoorlik gedoen het nie.

Terwyl hy in die vertrek rondkyk en aan die een of ander onheilsvoorval wat hulle nog nie gebruik het nie, probeer dink, sien sit Harry vir Fred en George saam teen die oorkantste muur met hul koppe gebuig oor ’n stukkie perkament en hul veerpenne gereed. Dit is baie ongewoon om Fred en George eenkant doodstil in ’n hoekie te sien werk; hulle hou gewoonlik daarvan om die raserige middelpunt te wees en al die aandag op hulle te vestig. Daar is iets geheimsinnigs aan die manier waarop hulle op die stuk perkament werk en Harry onthou hoe hulle saam in Die Konynenes sit en skryf het. Toe het hy gedink dat dit ’n nuwe bestelvorm vir *Weasley se Wonderpoetse* is, maar hierdie keer lyk dit nie so nie; as dit so iets was, sou hulle Lee Jordaan vir seker by die grap betrek het. Hy wonder of dit iets met die inskrywings vir die Drietowenaarstoernooi uit te waai het.

Terwyl Harry toekyk, skud George sy kop vir Fred, krap iets met sy veerpen uit en sê in ’n gedempte stem wat tog dwarsoor die verlate vertrek hoorbaar is, “Nee – dit klink asof ons hom beskuldig. Moet versigtig wees . . .”

Toe kyk George op en vang Harry se oog. Harry glimlag en gaan vinnig met sy voorspellings voort – hy wil nie hê dat George moet dink dat hy af luister nie. Kort daarna rol die tweeling hul perkament op, sê nag en gaan kamer toe.

Fred en George is maar sowat tien minute weg toe die portretopening oopgaan en Hermien in die geselskamer klim met ’n bondel papiere in een hand en ’n doos, waarvan die inhoud met elke tree ratel, in die ander. Kromskeen maak sy rug krom en spin.

"Hallo," sê sy. "Ek is klaar!"

"Ek ook!" sê Ron triomfantlik en gooi sy veerpen neer.

Hermien gaan sit, plak die goed wat sy saamgebring het op 'n leë stoel neer en trek Ron se voorspellings nader.

"Lyk nie of jy 'n goeie maand gaan hê nie, of hoe?" sê sy sardonies terwyl Kromskeen in haar skoot opkrul.

"Wel, ek is ten minste gewaarsku," gaap Ron.

"Lyk my jy gaan twee keer verdrink," sê Hermien.

"O, gaan ek?" sê Ron en loer af na sy voorspellings. "Ek sal een van hulle moet verander na iets soos *getrap deur 'n aanstormende Hippogrief*."

"Dink jy nie dis 'n bietjie ooglopend dat jy dit opgemaak het nie?" sê Hermien.

"Hoe durf jy!" sê Ron gemaak verontwaardig. "Ons het onself erger as huiselwe afgesloof!"

Hermien lig haar wenkbroue.

"Net 'n segswyse," sê Ron vinnig.

Nou sit Harry ook sy veerpen neer na hy sy eie dood by wyse van ont-hoofding voorspel het.

"Wat's in daardie doos?" vra hy en wys daarna.

"Snaaks dat jy vra," sê Hermien met 'n gemene kyk na Ron. Sy haal die deksel af en wys die inhoud vir hulle.

Binne-in is 'n stuk of vyftig lapelknopies, almal in verskillende kleure, maar met dieselfde letters daarop: S.P.O.E.G.

"Spoeg?" sê Harry en tel 'n lapelknopie op om dit te bekyk. "Wat is dit nou eintlik?"

"Nie *spoeg* nie," sê Hermien ongeduldig. "Dis S – P – O – E – G. Dit staan vir Steungroep vir die Promosie en Ontwikkeling van Elwegelykheid."

"Nog nooit daarvan gehoor nie," sê Ron.

"Wel, natuurlik het jy nie," sê Hermien flink. "Ek het dit so pas gestig."

"Ja?" sê Ron ligweg verbaas. "Hoeveel lede het jy al?"

"Wel – as julle twee aansluit – drie," sê Hermien.

"En jy dink ons gaan rondloop met lapelknopies waarop 'spoeg' staan?" sê Ron.

"S – P – O – E – G!" sê Hermien vererg. "Ek wou Staak die Belaglike Uitbuiting van ons Medemagiese Creature en Veg vir 'n Verandering in hul Wetlike Status daarop sit, maar dit wou nie inpas nie. Dis hoekom *dit* nou die opskrif van ons manifes is."

Sy swaai die bondel perkament voor hulle. "Ek het alles deeglik in die biblioteek nagevors. Die tot slawe maak van elwe het eeue gelede begin. Ek kan nie glo dat daar tot nou toe nog niemand was wat iets daaraan gedoen het nie."

“Hermien – maak jou ore oop,” sê Ron hard. “Hulle. Hou. Daarvan. Hulle hou daarvan om slawe te wees!”

“Ons korttermyn doelwitte,” sê Hermien, wat net nog harder as Ron praat en maak asof sy nie ’n woord gehoor het nie, “is om billike lone en werksomstandighede vir huiselwe te bewerkstellig. Op die lang termyn sluit ons doelwitte veranderings in die wet oor die niegebruik van towerstawwe in, sowel as pogings om ’n elf in die Departement vir die Regulering en Beheer van Magiese Kreature aangestel te kry omdat hulle skokkend ondervteenwoordig is.”

“En hoe gaan ons dit alles doen?” vra Harry.

“Ons gaan begin deur lede te werf,” sê Hermien opgetoë. “Ek het gedink so twee Sekels om aan te sluit – daarmee koop jy ’n knopie – en die opbrengs sal vir ons strooibiljette betaal. Jy is die tesourier, Ron – ek het ’n kollekteerblikkie bo – en Harry, jy’s die sekretaris, dus moet jy alles neerskryf wat ek hier sê as ’n rekord van ons eerste vergadering.”

Daar is ’n stilte waarin Hermien stralend na die ander twee kyk en Harry net daar sit, verdeel tussen ergernis teenoor Hermien en geamuseerdheid oor die uitdrukking op Ron se gesig. Die stilte word verbreek, nie deur Ron wat in elk geval lyk asof hy tydelik sprakeloos is nie, maar deur ’n sagte getik-tik teen die venster. Harry kyk oor die geselskamer wat nou leeg is en in die lig van die maan sien hy ’n sneeu-uil wat op die vensterbank sit.

“Hedwig!” roep hy uit, spring uit sy stoel en storm deur die vertrek om die venster oop te stoot.

Hedwig vlieg in, sweef oor die vertrek en land op die tafel bo-op Harry se voorspellings.

“Omtrent tyd!” sê Harry toe hy haastig nader kom.

“Sy het ’n antwoord!” sê Ron opgewonde en wys na die smerige stukkie perkament wat aan Hedwig se been vasgemaak is.

Harry maak dit haastig los en gaan sit om dit te lees terwyl Hedwig tot op sy knie vlieg en gedemp hoe-hoe.

“Wat staan daarin?” sê Hermien uitasem.

Die brief is baie kort en lyk asof dit haastig geskryf is. Harry lees dit hardop voor:

Harry –

Ek vlieg dadelik noord. Hierdie nuus oor jou litteken is die jongste in ’n reeks eienaardige gerugte wat my bereik het. As dit weer seer is, moet jy dadelik na Dompeldorius toe gaan – hulle sê hy het vir Maloog Moodie wat eintlik afgetree is, aangestel. Dit moet beteken dat hy die tekens lees, selfs al wil niemand anders dit doen nie.

Ek sal spoedig kontak maak. Groete aan Ron en Hermien. Hou jou oë oop, Harry.

Sirius

Harry kyk op na Ron en Hermien wat op hul beurt na hom staar.

“Hy vlieg noord?” fluister Hermien. “Hy kom *terug*?”

“Watter tekens het Dompeldorius gelees?” sê Ron wat verward lyk.

“Harry – wat gaan aan?”

Harry het homself so pas met sy vuus teen die voorkop geslaan sodat Hedwig van sy knie aftuimel.

“Ek moes nie vir hom gesê het nie!” sê Harry ergerlik.

“Waarvan praat jy?” vra Ron verbaas.

“Dit het hom laat dink dat hy moet terugkom!” sê Harry wat nou so hard met sy vuus op die tafel slaan dat Hedwig op Ron se rugleuning gaan sit en verontwaardig hoe-hoe. “Hy kom terug omdat hy dink dat ek in die moeilikheid is! En daar’s niks met my verkeerd nie! En ek het ook niks vir jou nie,” jak Harry vir Hedwig af toe sy haar snawel vol afwagting klink, “jy moet na die Uilhuis gaan as jy kos wil hê.”

Hedwig gee hom ’n uiters verontwaardige kyk en pyl dan op die oop venster af terwyl sy hom in die verbyvlieg met ’n uitgestrekte vlerk teen die kop klap.

“Harry,” begin Hermien in ’n kalmerende soort stem.

“Ek gaan slaap,” sê Harry kortaf. “Sien julle môreoggend.”

Bo in die slaapsaal trek hy sy nagklere aan en klim in sy hemelbed hoewel hy glad nie moeg voel nie.

As Sirius terugkom en gevang word, sal dit sy, Harry, se skuld wees. Hoekom het hy nie sy mond gehou nie? ’n Paar sekondes se pyn en hy moet alles staan en uitblaker . . . as hy net sy verstand gebruik en stilgebly het . . .

’n Rukkie later hoor hy hoe Ron by die slaapsaal inkom, maar hy praat nie met hom nie. Vir ’n lang tyd lê Harry en staar na die bed se donker baldakyn. Die slaapsaal is heeltemal stil, maar as hy nie so in gedagtes versoonke was nie, sou Harry besef het dat die afwesigheid van Neville se gesnork beteken dat hy nie die enigste een is wat wakker lê nie.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



BEAUXBATONS AND DURMSTRANG

Early next morning, Harry woke with a plan fully formed in his mind, as though his sleeping brain had been working on it all night. He got up, dressed in the pale dawn light, left the dormitory without waking Ron, and went back down to the deserted common room. Here he took a piece of parchment from the table upon which his Divination homework still lay and wrote the following letter:

Dear Sirius,

I reckon I just imagined my scar hurting, I was half asleep when I wrote to you last time. There's no point coming back, everything's fine here. Don't worry about me, my head feels completely normal.

Harry

He then climbed out of the portrait hole, up through the silent castle (held up only briefly by Peeves, who tried to overturn a large vase on him halfway along the fourth-floor corridor), finally arriving at the Owlery, which was situated at the top of West Tower.

The Owlery was a circular stone room, rather cold and drafty, because none of the windows had glass in them. The floor was entirely covered in straw, owl droppings, and the regurgitated skeletons of mice and voles. Hundreds upon hundreds of owls of every breed imaginable were nestled here on perches that rose right up to the top of the tower, nearly all of them asleep, though here and there a round amber eye glared at Harry. He spotted Hedwig nestled between a barn owl and a tawny, and hurried over to her, sliding a little on the dropping-strewn floor.

It took him a while to persuade her to wake up and then to look at him, as she kept shuffling around on her perch, showing him her tail. She was evidently still furious about his lack of gratitude the previous night. In the end, it was Harry suggesting she might be too tired, and that perhaps he would ask Ron to borrow Pigwidgeon, that made her stick out her leg and allow him to tie the letter to it.

“Just find him, all right?” Harry said, stroking her back as he carried her on his arm to one of the holes in the wall. “Before the dementors do.”

She nipped his finger, perhaps rather harder than she would ordinarily have done, but hooted softly in a reassuring sort of way all

the same. Then she spread her wings and took off into the sunrise. Harry watched her fly out of sight with the familiar feeling of unease back in his stomach. He had been so sure that Sirius's reply would alleviate his worries rather than increasing them.

"That was a *lie*, Harry," said Hermione sharply over breakfast, when he told her and Ron what he had done. "You *didn't* imagine your scar hurting and you know it."

"So what?" said Harry. "He's not going back to Azkaban because of me."

"Drop it," said Ron sharply to Hermione as she opened her mouth to argue some more, and for once, Hermione heeded him, and fell silent.

Harry did his best not to worry about Sirius over the next couple of weeks. True, he could not stop himself from looking anxiously around every morning when the post owls arrived, nor, late at night before he went to sleep, prevent himself from seeing horrible visions of Sirius, cornered by dementors down some dark London street, but beentimes he tried to keep his mind off his godfather. He wished he still had Quidditch to distract him; nothing worked so well on a troubled mind as a good, hard training session. On the other hand, their lessons were becoming more difficult and demanding than ever before, particularly Moody's Defense Against the Dark Arts.

To their surprise, Professor Moody had announced that he would be putting the Imperius Curse on each of them in turn, to demonstrate its power and to see whether they could resist its effects.

"But — but you said it's illegal, Professor," said Hermione uncertainly as Moody cleared away the desks with a sweep of his

wand, leaving a large clear space in the middle of the room. “You said — to use it against another human was —”

“Dumbledore wants you taught what it feels like,” said Moody, his magical eye swiveling onto Hermione and fixing her with an eerie, unblinking stare. “If you’d rather learn the hard way — when someone’s putting it on you so they can control you completely — fine by me. You’re excused. Off you go.”

He pointed one gnarled finger toward the door. Hermione went very pink and muttered something about not meaning that she wanted to leave. Harry and Ron grinned at each other. They knew Hermione would rather eat bubotuber pus than miss such an important lesson.

Moody began to beckon students forward in turn and put the Imperius Curse upon them. Harry watched as, one by one, his classmates did the most extraordinary things under its influence. Dean Thomas hopped three times around the room, singing the national anthem. Lavender Brown imitated a squirrel. Neville performed a series of quite astonishing gymnastics he would certainly not have been capable of in his normal state. Not one of them seemed to be able to fight off the curse, and each of them recovered only when Moody had removed it.

“Potter,” Moody growled, “you next.”

Harry moved forward into the middle of the classroom, into the space that Moody had cleared of desks. Moody raised his wand, pointed it at Harry, and said, “*Imperio!*”

It was the most wonderful feeling. Harry felt a floating sensation as every thought and worry in his head was wiped gently away, leaving nothing but a vague, untraceable happiness. He stood there

feeling immensely relaxed, only dimly aware of everyone watching him.

And then he heard Mad-Eye Moody's voice, echoing in some distant chamber of his empty brain: *Jump onto the desk . . . jump onto the desk. . . .*

Harry bent his knees obediently, preparing to spring.

Jump onto the desk. . . .

Why, though? Another voice had awoken in the back of his brain.

Stupid thing to do, really, said the voice.

Jump onto the desk. . . .

No, I don't think I will, thanks, said the other voice, a little more firmly . . . no, I don't really want to. . . .

Jump! NOW!

The next thing Harry felt was considerable pain. He had both jumped and tried to prevent himself from jumping — the result was that he'd smashed headlong into the desk, knocking it over, and, by the feeling in his legs, fractured both his kneecaps.

"Now, *that's* more like it!" growled Moody's voice, and suddenly, Harry felt the empty, echoing feeling in his head disappear. He remembered exactly what was happening, and the pain in his knees seemed to double.

"Look at that, you lot . . . Potter fought! He fought it, and he damn near beat it! We'll try that again, Potter, and the rest of you, pay attention — watch his eyes, that's where you see it — very good, Potter, very good indeed! They'll have trouble controlling *you!*"

"The way he talks," Harry muttered as he hobbled out of the Defense

Against the Dark Arts class an hour later (Moody had insisted on putting Harry through his paces four times in a row, until Harry could throw off the curse entirely), “you’d think we were all going to be attacked any second.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Ron, who was skipping on every alternate step. He had had much more difficulty with the curse than Harry, though Moody assured him the effects would wear off by lunchtime. “Talk about paranoid . . .” Ron glanced nervously over his shoulder to check that Moody was definitely out of earshot and went on. “No wonder they were glad to get shot of him at the Ministry. Did you hear him telling Seamus what he did to that witch who shouted ‘Boo’ behind him on April Fools’ Day? And when are we supposed to read up on resisting the Imperius Curse with everything else we’ve got to do?”

All the fourth years had noticed a definite increase in the amount of work they were required to do this term. Professor McGonagall explained why, when the class gave a particularly loud groan at the amount of Transfiguration homework she had assigned.

“You are now entering a most important phase of your magical education!” she told them, her eyes glinting dangerously behind her square spectacles. “Your Ordinary Wizarding Levels are drawing closer —”

“We don’t take O.W.L.s till fifth year!” said Dean Thomas indignantly.

“Maybe not, Thomas, but believe me, you need all the preparation you can get! Miss Granger remains the only person in this class who has managed to turn a hedgehog into a satisfactory pincushion. I might

remind you that *your* pincushion, Thomas, still curls up in fright if anyone approaches it with a pin!”

Hermione, who had turned rather pink again, seemed to be trying not to look too pleased with herself.

Harry and Ron were deeply amused when Professor Trelawney told them that they had received top marks for their homework in their next Divination class. She read out large portions of their predictions, commending them for their unflinching acceptance of the horrors in store for them — but they were less amused when she asked them to do the same thing for the month after next; both of them were running out of ideas for catastrophes.

Meanwhile Professor Binns, the ghost who taught History of Magic, had them writing weekly essays on the goblin rebellions of the eighteenth century. Professor Snape was forcing them to research antidotes. They took this one seriously, as he had hinted that he might be poisoning one of them before Christmas to see if their antidote worked. Professor Flitwick had asked them to read three extra books in preparation for their lesson on Summoning Charms.

Even Hagrid was adding to their workload. The Blast-Ended Skrewts were growing at a remarkable pace given that nobody had yet discovered what they ate. Hagrid was delighted, and as part of their “project,” suggested that they come down to his hut on alternate evenings to observe the skrewts and make notes on their extraordinary behavior.

“I will not,” said Draco Malfoy flatly when Hagrid had proposed this with the air of Father Christmas pulling an extra-large toy out of his sack. “I see enough of these foul things during lessons, thanks.”

Hagrid's smile faded off his face.

"Yeh'll do wha' yer told," he growled, "or I'll be takin' a leaf outta Professor Moody's book. . . . I hear yeh made a good ferret, Malfoy."

The Gryffindors roared with laughter. Malfoy flushed with anger, but apparently the memory of Moody's punishment was still sufficiently painful to stop him from retorting. Harry, Ron, and Hermione returned to the castle at the end of the lesson in high spirits; seeing Hagrid put down Malfoy was particularly satisfying, especially because Malfoy had done his very best to get Hagrid sacked the previous year.

When they arrived in the entrance hall, they found themselves unable to proceed owing to the large crowd of students congregated there, all milling around a large sign that had been erected at the foot of the marble staircase. Ron, the tallest of the three, stood on tiptoe to see over the heads in front of them and read the sign aloud to the other two:

TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT

THE DELEGATIONS FROM BEAUXBATONS AND DURMSTRANG
WILL BE ARRIVING AT 6 O'CLOCK ON FRIDAY THE 30TH OF
OCTOBER. LESSONS WILL END HALF AN HOUR EARLY —

"Brilliant!" said Harry. "It's Potions last thing on Friday! Snape won't have time to poison us all!"

STUDENTS WILL RETURN THEIR BAGS AND BOOKS TO THEIR
DORMITORIES AND ASSEMBLE IN FRONT OF THE CASTLE TO

GREET OUR GUESTS BEFORE THE WELCOMING FEAST.

“Only a week away!” said Ernie Macmillan of Hufflepuff, emerging from the crowd, his eyes gleaming. “I wonder if Cedric knows? Think I’ll go and tell him. . . .”

“Cedric?” said Ron blankly as Ernie hurried off.

“Diggory,” said Harry. “He must be entering the tournament.”

“That idiot, Hogwarts champion?” said Ron as they pushed their way through the chattering crowd toward the staircase.

“He’s not an idiot. You just don’t like him because he beat Gryffindor at Quidditch,” said Hermione. “I’ve heard he’s a really good student — *and* he’s a prefect.”

She spoke as though this settled the matter.

“You only like him because he’s *handsome*,” said Ron scathingly.

“Excuse me, I don’t like people just because they’re handsome!” said Hermione indignantly.

Ron gave a loud false cough, which sounded oddly like “*Lockhart!*”

The appearance of the sign in the entrance hall had a marked effect upon the inhabitants of the castle. During the following week, there seemed to be only one topic of conversation, no matter where Harry went: the Triwizard Tournament. Rumors were flying from student to student like highly contagious germs: who was going to try for Hogwarts champion, what the tournament would involve, how the students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang differed from themselves.

Harry noticed too that the castle seemed to be undergoing an extra-thorough cleaning. Several grimy portraits had been scrubbed, much

to the displeasure of their subjects, who sat huddled in their frames muttering darkly and wincing as they felt their raw pink faces. The suits of armor were suddenly gleaming and moving without squeaking, and Argus Filch, the caretaker, was behaving so ferociously to any students who forgot to wipe their shoes that he terrified a pair of first-year girls into hysterics.

Other members of the staff seemed oddly tense too.

“Longbottom, kindly do *not* reveal that you can’t even perform a simple Switching Spell in front of anyone from Durmstrang!” Professor McGonagall barked at the end of one particularly difficult lesson, during which Neville had accidentally transplanted his own ears onto a cactus.

When they went down to breakfast on the morning of the thirtieth of October, they found that the Great Hall had been decorated overnight. Enormous silk banners hung from the walls, each of them representing a Hogwarts House: red with a gold lion for Gryffindor, blue with a bronze eagle for Ravenclaw, yellow with a black badger for Hufflepuff, and green with a silver serpent for Slytherin. Behind the teachers’ table, the largest banner of all bore the Hogwarts coat of arms: lion, eagle, badger, and snake united around a large letter H.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down beside Fred and George at the Gryffindor table. Once again, and most unusually, they were sitting apart from everyone else and conversing in low voices. Ron led the way over to them.

“It’s a bummer, all right,” George was saying gloomily to Fred. “But if he won’t talk to us in person, we’ll have to send him the letter after all. Or we’ll stuff it into his hand. He can’t avoid us forever.”

“Who’s avoiding you?” said Ron, sitting down next to them.

“Wish you would,” said Fred, looking irritated at the interruption.

“What’s a bummer?” Ron asked George.

“Having a nosy git like you for a brother,” said George.

“You two got any ideas on the Triwizard Tournament yet?” Harry asked. “Thought any more about trying to enter?”

“I asked McGonagall how the champions are chosen but she wasn’t telling,” said George bitterly. “She just told me to shut up and get on with Transfiguring my raccoon.”

“Wonder what the tasks are going to be?” said Ron thoughtfully. “You know, I bet we could do them, Harry. We’ve done dangerous stuff before. . . .”

“Not in front of a panel of judges, you haven’t,” said Fred. “McGonagall says the champions get awarded points according to how well they’ve done the tasks.”

“Who are the judges?” Harry asked.

“Well, the Heads of the participating schools are always on the panel,” said Hermione, and everyone looked around at her, rather surprised, “because all three of them were injured during the Tournament of 1792, when a cockatrice the champions were supposed to be catching went on the rampage.”

She noticed them all looking at her and said, with her usual air of impatience that nobody else had read all the books she had, “It’s all in *Hogwarts: A History*. Though, of course, that book’s not *entirely* reliable. *A Revised History of Hogwarts* would be a more accurate title. Or *A Highly Biased and Selective History of Hogwarts, Which Glosses Over the Nastier Aspects of the School*.”

“What are you on about?” said Ron, though Harry thought he knew what was coming.

“*House-elves!*” said Hermione, her eyes flashing. “Not once, in over a thousand pages, does *Hogwarts: A History* mention that we are all colluding in the oppression of a hundred slaves!”

Harry shook his head and applied himself to his scrambled eggs. His and Ron’s lack of enthusiasm had done nothing whatsoever to curb Hermione’s determination to pursue justice for house-elves. True, both of them had paid two Sickles for a S.P.E.W. badge, but they had only done it to keep her quiet. Their Sickles had been wasted, however; if anything, they seemed to have made Hermione more vociferous. She had been badgering Harry and Ron ever since, first to wear the badges, then to persuade others to do the same, and she had also taken to rattling around the Gryffindor common room every evening, cornering people and shaking the collecting tin under their noses.

“You do realize that your sheets are changed, your fires lit, your classrooms cleaned, and your food cooked by a group of magical creatures who are unpaid and enslaved?” she kept saying fiercely.

Some people, like Neville, had paid up just to stop Hermione from glowering at them. A few seemed mildly interested in what she had to say, but were reluctant to take a more active role in campaigning. Many regarded the whole thing as a joke.

Ron now rolled his eyes at the ceiling, which was flooding them all in autumn sunlight, and Fred became extremely interested in his bacon (both twins had refused to buy a S.P.E.W. badge). George, however, leaned in toward Hermione.

“Listen, have you ever been down in the kitchens, Hermione?”

“No, of course not,” said Hermione curtly, “I hardly think students are supposed to —”

“Well, we have,” said George, indicating Fred, “loads of times, to nick food. And we’ve met them, and they’re *happy*. They think they’ve got the best job in the world —”

“That’s because they’re uneducated and brainwashed!” Hermione began hotly, but her next few words were drowned out by the sudden whooshing noise from overhead, which announced the arrival of the post owls. Harry looked up at once, and saw Hedwig soaring toward him. Hermione stopped talking abruptly; she and Ron watched Hedwig anxiously as she fluttered down onto Harry’s shoulder, folded her wings, and held out her leg wearily.

Harry pulled off Sirius’s reply and offered Hedwig his bacon rinds, which she ate gratefully. Then, checking that Fred and George were safely immersed in further discussions about the Triwizard Tournament, Harry read out Sirius’s letter in a whisper to Ron and Hermione.

Nice try, Harry.

I’m back in the country and well hidden. I want you to keep me posted on everything that’s going on at Hogwarts. Don’t use Hedwig, keep changing owls, and don’t worry about me, just watch out for yourself. Don’t forget what I said about your scar.

Sirius

“Why d’you have to keep changing owls?” Ron asked in a low voice.

“Hedwig’ll attract too much attention,” said Hermione at once. “She stands out. A snowy owl that keeps returning to wherever he’s hiding . . . I mean, they’re not native birds, are they?”

Harry rolled up the letter and slipped it inside his robes, wondering whether he felt more or less worried than before. He supposed that Sirius managing to get back without being caught was something. He couldn’t deny either that the idea that Sirius was much nearer was reassuring; at least he wouldn’t have to wait so long for a response every time he wrote.

“Thanks, Hedwig,” he said, stroking her. She hooted sleepily, dipped her beak briefly into his goblet of orange juice, then took off again, clearly desperate for a good long sleep in the Owlery.

There was a pleasant feeling of anticipation in the air that day. Nobody was very attentive in lessons, being much more interested in the arrival that evening of the people from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang; even Potions was more bearable than usual, as it was half an hour shorter. When the bell rang early, Harry, Ron, and Hermione hurried up to Gryffindor Tower, deposited their bags and books as they had been instructed, pulled on their cloaks, and rushed back downstairs into the entrance hall.

The Heads of Houses were ordering their students into lines.

“Weasley, straighten your hat,” Professor McGonagall snapped at Ron. “Miss Patil, take that ridiculous thing out of your hair.”

Parvati scowled and removed a large ornamental butterfly from the end of her plait.

“Follow me, please,” said Professor McGonagall. “First years in front . . . no pushing. . . .”

They filed down the steps and lined up in front of the castle. It was a cold, clear evening; dusk was falling and a pale, transparent-looking moon was already shining over the Forbidden Forest. Harry, standing between Ron and Hermione in the fourth row from the front, saw Dennis Creevey positively shivering with anticipation among the other first years.

“Nearly six,” said Ron, checking his watch and then staring down the drive that led to the front gates. “How d’you reckon they’re coming? The train?”

“I doubt it,” said Hermione.

“How, then? Broomsticks?” Harry suggested, looking up at the starry sky.

“I don’t think so . . . not from that far away. . . .”

“A Portkey?” Ron suggested. “Or they could Apparate — maybe you’re allowed to do it under seventeen wherever they come from?”

“You can’t Apparate inside the Hogwarts grounds, how often do I have to tell you?” said Hermione impatiently.

They scanned the darkening grounds excitedly, but nothing was moving; everything was still, silent, and quite as usual. Harry was starting to feel cold. He wished they’d hurry up. . . . Maybe the foreign students were preparing a dramatic entrance. . . . He remembered what Mr. Weasley had said back at the campsite before the Quidditch World Cup: “always the same — we can’t resist showing off when we get together. . . .”

And then Dumbledore called out from the back row where he

stood with the other teachers —

“Aha! Unless I am very much mistaken, the delegation from Beauxbatons approaches!”

“Where?” said many students eagerly, all looking in different directions.

“*There!*” yelled a sixth year, pointing over the forest.

Something large, much larger than a broomstick — or, indeed, a hundred broomsticks — was hurtling across the deep blue sky toward the castle, growing larger all the time.

“It’s a dragon!” shrieked one of the first years, losing her head completely.

“Don’t be stupid . . . it’s a flying house!” said Dennis Creevey.

Dennis’s guess was closer. . . . As the gigantic black shape skimmed over the treetops of the Forbidden Forest and the lights shining from the castle windows hit it, they saw a gigantic, powder-blue, horse-drawn carriage, the size of a large house, soaring toward them, pulled through the air by a dozen winged horses, all palominos, and each the size of an elephant.

The front three rows of students drew backward as the carriage hurtled ever lower, coming in to land at a tremendous speed — then, with an almighty crash that made Neville jump backward onto a Slytherin fifth year’s foot, the horses’ hooves, larger than dinner plates, hit the ground. A second later, the carriage landed too, bouncing upon its vast wheels, while the golden horses tossed their enormous heads and rolled large, fiery red eyes.

Harry just had time to see that the door of the carriage bore a coat of arms (two crossed, golden wands, each emitting three stars)

before it opened.

A boy in pale blue robes jumped down from the carriage, bent forward, fumbled for a moment with something on the carriage floor, and unfolded a set of golden steps. He sprang back respectfully. Then Harry saw a shining, high-heeled black shoe emerging from the inside of the carriage — a shoe the size of a child's sled — followed, almost immediately, by the largest woman he had ever seen in his life. The size of the carriage, and of the horses, was immediately explained. A few people gasped.

Harry had only ever seen one person as large as this woman in his life, and that was Hagrid; he doubted whether there was an inch difference in their heights. Yet somehow — maybe simply because he was used to Hagrid — this woman (now at the foot of the steps, and looking around at the waiting, wide-eyed crowd) seemed even more unnaturally large. As she stepped into the light flooding from the entrance hall, she was revealed to have a handsome, olive-skinned face; large, black, liquid-looking eyes; and a rather beaky nose. Her hair was drawn back in a shining knob at the base of her neck. She was dressed from head to foot in black satin, and many magnificent opals gleamed at her throat and on her thick fingers.

Dumbledore started to clap; the students, following his lead, broke into applause too, many of them standing on tiptoe, the better to look at this woman.

Her face relaxed into a gracious smile and she walked forward toward Dumbledore, extending a glittering hand. Dumbledore, though tall himself, had barely to bend to kiss it.

“My dear Madame Maxime,” he said. “Welcome to Hogwarts.”

“Dumbly-dorr,” said Madame Maxime in a deep voice. “I ’ope I find you well?”

“In excellent form, I thank you,” said Dumbledore.

“My pupils,” said Madame Maxime, waving one of her enormous hands carelessly behind her.

Harry, whose attention had been focused completely upon Madame Maxime, now noticed that about a dozen boys and girls, all, by the look of them, in their late teens, had emerged from the carriage and were now standing behind Madame Maxime. They were shivering, which was unsurprising, given that their robes seemed to be made of fine silk, and none of them were wearing cloaks. A few had wrapped scarves and shawls around their heads. From what Harry could see of them (they were standing in Madame Maxime’s enormous shadow), they were staring up at Hogwarts with apprehensive looks on their faces.

“As Karkaroff arrived yet?” Madame Maxime asked.

“He should be here any moment,” said Dumbledore. “Would you like to wait here and greet him or would you prefer to step inside and warm up a trifle?”

“Warm up, I think,” said Madame Maxime. “But ze ’orses —”

“Our Care of Magical Creatures teacher will be delighted to take care of them,” said Dumbledore, “the moment he has returned from dealing with a slight situation that has arisen with some of his other — er — charges.”

“Skrewts,” Ron muttered to Harry, grinning.

“My steeds require — er — forceful ’andling,” said Madame Maxime, looking as though she doubted whether any Care of Magical

Creatures teacher at Hogwarts could be up to the job. “Zey are very strong. . . .”

“I assure you that Hagrid will be well up to the job,” said Dumbledore, smiling.

“Very well,” said Madame Maxime, bowing slightly. “Will you please inform zis ’Agrid zat ze ’orses drink only single-malt whiskey?”

“It will be attended to,” said Dumbledore, also bowing.

“Come,” said Madame Maxime imperiously to her students, and the Hogwarts crowd parted to allow her and her students to pass up the stone steps.

“How big d’you reckon Durmstrang’s horses are going to be?” Seamus Finnigan said, leaning around Lavender and Parvati to address Harry and Ron.

“Well, if they’re any bigger than this lot, even Hagrid won’t be able to handle them,” said Harry. “That’s if he hasn’t been attacked by his skrewts. Wonder what’s up with them?”

“Maybe they’ve escaped,” said Ron hopefully.

“Oh don’t say that,” said Hermione with a shudder. “Imagine that lot loose on the grounds. . . .”

They stood, shivering slightly now, waiting for the Durmstrang party to arrive. Most people were gazing hopefully up at the sky. For a few minutes, the silence was broken only by Madame Maxime’s huge horses snorting and stamping. But then —

“Can you hear something?” said Ron suddenly.

Harry listened; a loud and oddly eerie noise was drifting toward them from out of the darkness: a muffled rumbling and sucking sound,

as though an immense vacuum cleaner were moving along a riverbed. . . .

“The lake!” yelled Lee Jordan, pointing down at it. “Look at the lake!”

From their position at the top of the lawns overlooking the grounds, they had a clear view of the smooth black surface of the water — except that the surface was suddenly not smooth at all. Some disturbance was taking place deep in the center; great bubbles were forming on the surface, waves were now washing over the muddy banks — and then, out in the very middle of the lake, a whirlpool appeared, as if a giant plug had just been pulled out of the lake’s floor. . . .

What seemed to be a long, black pole began to rise slowly out of the heart of the whirlpool . . . and then Harry saw the rigging. . . .

“It’s a mast!” he said to Ron and Hermione.

Slowly, magnificently, the ship rose out of the water, gleaming in the moonlight. It had a strangely skeletal look about it, as though it were a resurrected wreck, and the dim, misty lights shimmering at its portholes looked like ghostly eyes. Finally, with a great sloshing noise, the ship emerged entirely, bobbing on the turbulent water, and began to glide toward the bank. A few moments later, they heard the splash of an anchor being thrown down in the shallows, and the thud of a plank being lowered onto the bank.

People were disembarking; they could see their silhouettes passing the lights in the ship’s portholes. All of them, Harry noticed, seemed to be built along the lines of Crabbe and Goyle . . . but then, as they drew nearer, walking up the lawns into the light streaming from the

entrance hall, he saw that their bulk was really due to the fact that they were wearing cloaks of some kind of shaggy, matted fur. But the man who was leading them up to the castle was wearing furs of a different sort: sleek and silver, like his hair.

“Dumbledore!” he called heartily as he walked up the slope. “How are you, my dear fellow, how are you?”

“Blooming, thank you, Professor Karkaroff,” Dumbledore replied.

Karkaroff had a fruity, unctuous voice; when he stepped into the light pouring from the front doors of the castle they saw that he was tall and thin like Dumbledore, but his white hair was short, and his goatee (finishing in a small curl) did not entirely hide his rather weak chin. When he reached Dumbledore, he shook hands with both of his own.

“Dear old Hogwarts,” he said, looking up at the castle and smiling; his teeth were rather yellow, and Harry noticed that his smile did not extend to his eyes, which remained cold and shrewd. “How good it is to be here, how good. . . . Viktor, come along, into the warmth . . . you don’t mind, Dumbledore? Viktor has a slight head cold. . . .”

Karkaroff beckoned forward one of his students. As the boy passed, Harry caught a glimpse of a prominent curved nose and thick black eyebrows. He didn’t need the punch on the arm Ron gave him, or the hiss in his ear, to recognize that profile.

“Harry — *it’s Krum!*”

Beauxbatons en Durmstrang

Harry word vroeg die volgende oggend wakker met 'n ten volle gevormde plan in sy kop nes of sy slapende brein die hele nag daaraan gewerk het. Hy staan op, trek in die dowwe oggendlig aan, stap by die slaapsaal uit sonder om vir Ron wakker te maak en gaan terug na die verlate geselskamer. Hier tel hy 'n stuk perkament van die tafel af op waar sy Waarsêhuiswerk nog lê, en skryf die volgende brief:

Liewe Sirius

Ek het my sommer net verbeel dat my litteken seer was. Ek was half deur die slaap toe ek laas vir jou geskryf het. Dis regtig sinneloos om terug te kom, alles hier is in die haak. Moet jou nie oor my bekommer nie, my kop voel heeltemal reg.

Harry

Toe klim hy deur die portretopening en stap deur die verlate kasteel (hy word net 'n oomblik deur Nurks opgehou toe dié, in die middel van die gang op die vierde verdieping, 'n groot vaas op hom probeer omkeer) tot hy uiteindelik by die Uilhuis kom wat heel bo in die Westoring is.

Die Uilhuis is 'n sirkelvormige klipvertrek, ietwat koud en trekkerig, want nie een van die vensters het glas in nie. Die vloer is toe onder strooi, uilmis en die geraamtes van muise en molle wat die uile opgebring het. Honderde en honderde uile van alle denkbare soorte sit hier op dwarsstokke wat tot hoog bo in die toring strek en feitlik almal is vas aan die slaap, hoewel daar hier en daar 'n amber oog is wat na Harry gluur. Hy sien Hedwig tussen 'n nonnetjiesuil en 'n roofuil en haas hom, gly-gly in die mis op die vloer, na haar toe.

Dit neem hom 'n hele rukkie om haar sover te kry om wakker te word, en toe om na hom te kyk, want sy skuifel die hele tyd op haar dwarsstok rond en draai haar stert na hom. Dit is duidelik dat sy nog steeds omgekrap is oor sy gebrek aan dankbaarheid die vorige nag. Op die ou end is dit eers toe Harry sê dat hy maar vir Ron sal vra of hy vir Pigwidgeon kan leen dat sy 'n been uitsteek en hom toelaat om die brief daaraan vas te maak.

“Kry hom net, oukei?” sê Harry en streel oor haar rug toe hy haar op sy arm na een van die gate in die muur dra, “voor die Dementors hom het.”

Sy knibbel aan sy vinger, dalk ietwat harder as wat sy normaalweg sou doen, maar hoe-hoe tog saggies op ’n gerusstellende manier. Toe sprei sy haar vlerke oop en vlieg die sonsopkoms binne. Harry kyk haar agterna en die bekende gevoel van onrustigheid is terug in sy maag. Hy was so seker dat Sirius se antwoord sy bekommernisse sou wegneem, maar nou is alles net erger.

“Dit was ’n leuen, Harry,” sê Hermien skerp aan die ontbyttafel toe hy vir haar en Ron vertel wat hy gedoen het. “Jy het jou *nie* verbeeld dat jou litteken seer is nie en jy weet dit.”

“En wat daarvan?” sê Harry. “Hy gaan nie terug Azkaban toe net oor my nie.”

“Los dit,” sê Ron kwaai vir Hermien toe sy haar mond oopmaak om verder te stry en vir ’n verandering luister Hermien na hom en bly stil.

Die volgende paar weke doen Harry sy bes om hom nie verder oor Sirius te bekommer nie. Hoewel hy nie anders kan as om elke oggend wanneer die posuile kom benoud rond te kyk nie, of om snags, voor hy aan die slaap raak, aaklige visioene te hê waarin Sirius deur die Dementors in ’n donker straat in Londen vasgekeer word, probeer hy tog om nie aan sy peetpa te dink nie. Hy wens hy kon Kwiddiek speel om sy aandag af te lei; niks is so goed vir ’n beswaarde gemoed soos ’n goeie, harde oefensessie nie. Hul lesse raak egter nou al moeiliker en veeleisender as ooit tevore, veral Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste.

Tot hul verbasing kondig professor Moodie aan dat hy die Imperiusvloek om die beurt oor elkeen van hulle gaan uitspreek om so die vloek se krag te demonstreer en te sien of hulle dit kan weerstaan.

“Maar – maar u het gesê dat dit onwettig is, professor,” sê Hermien onseker toe Moodie die lessenaars met ’n swiep van sy towerstaf uit die pad vee sodat daar ’n groot oop spasie in die middel van die vertrek is. “U het gesê – dat om dit teen ’n medemens te gebruik, is –”

“Dompeldorius wil hê julle moet weet hoe dit voel,” sê Moodie en sy magiese oog draai na Hermien en kyk stip en op ’n aardige, starende manier na haar. “As jy eerder op die harde manier wil leer – wanneer iemand dit oor jou uitspreek om jou sodoende ten volle te beheer – is dit in orde. Jy is verskoon. Uit.”

Hy wys met een knoetsige vinger na die deur. Hermien word baie pienk en brom dat sy nie bedoel het dat sy nie die klas wil bywoon nie. Harry en Ron grinnik vir mekaar. Hulle weet Hermien sal eerder Buileknoletter eet as om so ’n belangrike les te mis.

Moodie wink die studente beurtelings nader om die Imperiusvloek

oor hulle uit te spreek. Harry kyk toe terwyl sy klasmaats die een na die ander die vreemdste goed onder die invloed van die vloek doen. Dean Thomas hop drie keer deur die vertrek terwyl hy die volkslied sing. Hildegard Braun boots 'n eekhorning na. Neville doen 'n reeks verbasende toertjies wat hy nooit normaalweg sal regkry nie. Dit lyk of nie een van hulle dit regkry om die vloek af te weer nie en elkeen kom eers weer reg wanneer Moodie die vloek lig.

"Potter," grom Moodie, "jou beurt."

Harry gaan staan in die middel van die klaskamer in die ruimte wat Moodie geskep het deur die lessenaars weg te toor. Moodie lig sy towerstaf, rig dit op Harry en sê, "*Imperio*."

Dit is die mees ongelooflik wonderlike sensasie. Dit voel vir Harry asof elke gedagte en bekommernis in sy kop sagkens weggevee word sodat niks behalwe 'n vae gevoel van geluk agterbly nie. Soos hy daar staan, voel hy vreeslik ontspanne en slegs vaagweg bewus van almal wat na hom kyk.

Toe hoor hy Maloog Moodie se stem soos 'n eggo in 'n verre vertrek van sy leë brein: *Spring op die lessenaar . . . spring op die lessenaar . . .*

Harry knak sy knieë gehoorsaam en maak gereed om te spring.

Spring op die lessenaar . . .

Hoekom?

Nog 'n stem het agterin sy brein wakker geword. Regtig 'n simpel ding om te doen, sê die stem.

Spring op die lessenaar . . .

Nee, ek dink nie ek wil nie, dankie, sê die ander stem 'n bietjie meer beslis . . . nee, ek wil regtig nie . . .

Spring! NOU!

Die volgende ding wat Harry voel, is 'n verskriklike pyn. Hy het probeer om te spring, maar ook om *nie* te spring nie – die gevolg is dat hy homself halsoorkop teen die lessenaar vasgeloop, dit omgestamp en, te oordeel na die gevoel in sy bene, albei sy knieknoppe gebreek het.

"Nou *dit* is meer wat ek soek!" grom Moodie se stem en Harry voel skielik hoe die leë, weergalmende gevoel in sy kop verdwyn. Hy onthou presies wat gebeur het en dis of die pyn in sy knieë verdubbel het.

"Kyk hier, julle klomp . . . Potter het hom teengesit! Hy't daarteen geveg en dit so amper afgeweer! Ons sal weer probeer, Potter, en die res van julle, gee aandag – kyk na sy oë, dis waar 'n mens dit sien – baie mooi, Potter, inderdaad baie mooi! Hulle sal sukkel om *jou* te beheer!"

"Aan die manier waarop hy praat," brom Harry toe hy 'n uur later hinkend uit die Verdeding teen die Donker Kunste-klas strompel (Moodie het daarop aangedring om Harry vier keer na mekaar deur sy passies te sit tot Harry die vloek heeltemal afgeweer het), "sal 'n mens dink dat ons almal enige oomblik aangeval gaan word."

“Ja, ek weet,” sê Ron wat met elke tweede tree ’n klein sprongetjie gee. Hy het baie meer met die vloek gesukkel as Harry, hoewel Moodie hom verseker het dat dit teen middagete uitgewerk sal wees. “Praat van vervolgingswaan . . .” Ron loer senuagtig oor sy skouer om seker te maak dat Moodie beslis buite hoorafstand is. Dan gaan hy voort, “Dis g’n wonder dat hulle verlig was om van hom ontslae te raak by die Ministerie nie, het jy gehoor toe hy vir Septimus vertel wat hy aan die heks gedoen het wat op Aprilgrapdag ‘boe’ agter hom geskree het? En wanneer moet ons nogal oplees oor hoe om die Imperiusvloek af te weer met al die ander goed wat ons ook nog moet doen?”

Al die vierdejaars het agtergekom dat die hoeveelheid werk wat hulle hierdie kwartaal moet doen merkbaar meer geword het. Professor McGonagall gee ’n verklaring toe die klas besonder hard kreun oor die hoeveelheid Transfigurasië-huiswerk wat sy vir hulle gee.

“Julle is nou op ’n baie belangrike fase van jul towenaarsopvoeding!” sê sy en haar oë glinster gevaarlik agter haar vierkantige bril. “Jul Uitsonderlike Intellektuele Liga is om die draai –”

“Maar ons doen ons UILE eers in ons vyfde jaar!” sê Dean Thomas verontwaardig.

“Dalk, Thomas, maar glo my, julle het al die voorbereiding nodig wat julle kan kry! Juffrou La Grange is steeds die enigste persoon in hierdie klas wat ’n krimpvarkie in ’n bevredigende speldekussing kan verander. Ek moet jou daaraan herinner, Thomas, dat *jou* speldekussing nog steeds opkrul van angs elke keer dat iemand met ’n speld nader kom!”

Dit lyk asof Hermien, wat weer effens pienk geword het, sukkel om nie alte in haar skik met haarself te wees nie.

Harry en Ron is hoogs geamuseerd toe professor Trelawney tydens die volgende Waarsê-klas vir hulle sê dat hulle die hoogste punte vir hul huiswerk gekry het. Sy lees groot dele van hul voorspellings voor en prys hulle oor hul onverskrokke aanvaarding van die gruwele wat op hulle wag – maar hulle is minder geamuseerd toe sy sê dat hulle dieselfde ding twee maande later moet doen; nie een van hulle het meer baie nuwe idees vir rampe nie.

Intussen laat professor Binns, die spook wat Geskiedenis van die Toewerkuns gee, hulle elke week ’n opstel skryf oor die Gnoomrebellies van die agtiende eeu. Professor Snerp dwing hulle om navorsing oor teenmiddels te doen. Hulle neem dit baie ernstig op, want hy sinspeel daarop dat hy miskien een van hulle voor Kersfees gaan vergiftig om te sien of hul teenmiddels werk. Professor Flickerpitt gee hulle drie ekstra boeke om te lees ter voorbereiding vir hul les oor Ontbied-towerspreuke.

Selfs Hagrid dra tot hul werklading by. Die Spuitstertkrewels groei teen ’n merkwaardige tempo, veral aangesien niemand nog weet wat hulle eet nie. Hagrid is hoogs in sy noppies en stel voor dat hulle, as deel van

hul “projek”, elke tweede aand na sy hut kom om die Krewels dop te hou en aantekeninge oor hul buitengewone gedrag te maak.

“Ek sal nie,” weier Draco Malfoy botweg toe Hagrid die voorstel maak met die houding van Vader Krismis wat ’n ekstragroot speelding uit sy sak haal. “Ek sien genoeg van hierdie vieslike goed tydens lesse, dankie.”

Hagrid se glimlag vervaag.

“Jy sal doen wat ek vir jou sê,” grom hy, “of ek sal professor Moodie se voorbeeld volg . . . ek hoor jy maak ’n baie goeie muishond uit, Malfoy.”

Die Griffindors skater van die lag. Malfoy bloos van woede, maar die herinnering aan Moodie se straf is skynbaar pynlik genoeg om te verhoed dat hy terugpraat. Toe Harry, Ron en Hermien aan die einde van die les teruggaan kasteel toe, is hulle baie opgeruimd. Om te kon sien hoe Hagrid vir Malfoy op sy plek sit, was besonder bevredigend, veral met dié dat Malfoy die vorige jaar sy bes gedoen het om Hagrid afgedank te kry.

Toe hulle in die ingangsportaal kom, is dit onmoontlik om deur die menigte studente wat daar bymekaargekom het, te beur. Almal drom saam om ’n groot bord wat aan die voet van die marmertrappe opgerig is. Ron, die langste van die drie, staan op sy tone om oor die koppe voor hulle te sien en lees hardop vir die ander twee voor.

DRIETOWENAARSTOERNOOI

Die afvaardigings van Beauxbatons en Durmstrang sal op Vrydag 30 Oktober om sesuur opdaag. Klasse sal ’n halfuur vroeg verdaag –

“Wonderlik!” sê Harry. “Die laaste klas op ’n Vrydag is Towerdrankies! Snerp sal ons dus nie kan vergiftig nie!”

Studente moet hul tasse en boeke na hul slaapsale neem en voor die kasteel bymekaarkom om ons gaste voor die Verwelkomingsfees te ontmoet.

“Nog net ’n week!” sê Ernie MacMillan van Hoesenproes toe hy met blink oë deur die skare beur. “Ek wonder of Cedric weet? Dink ek moet vir hom gaan sê . . .”

“Cedric?” sê Ron sonder uitdrukking toe Ernie hom uit die voete maak.

“Diggory,” sê Harry. “Hy gaan seker inskryf vir die Toernooi.”

“Daardie idioot Hogwarts se kampioen?” sê Ron terwyl hulle ’n pad deur die geselsende menigte na die trappe toe oopstoot.

“Hy’s nie ’n idioot nie; jy hou net nie van hom nie omdat hy vir Grifindor met Kwiddiek geklop het,” sê Hermien. “Almal sê hy’s regtig ’n goeie student – en hy’s ’n prefek.”

Sy praat asof dit die saak afhandel.

“Jy hou net van hom omdat hy *aantreklik* is,” sê Ron smalend.

“Verskoon my, ek hou nie van mense net omdat hulle aantreklik is nie!” sê Hermien verontwaardig.

Ron gee ’n harde, gemaakte hoes wat baie soos “Lockhart!” klink.

Die verskyning van die bord in die ingangsportaal het ’n merkwaardige uitwerking op die inwoners van die kasteel. Waar Harry ook al tydens die daaropvolgende week gaan, praat almal net oor een ding: die Drietoewenaarstoernooi. Gerugte vlieg soos hoogs aansteeklike kieme van student na student: Wie gaan probeer om die Hogwarts-kampioen te wees? Wat gaan die Toernooi alles behels? “Hoe gaan die studente van Beauxbatons en Durmstrang van hulle terwyl hulle inmekaarkrimp elke keer dat hulle aan hul rou en pienkgewaste gesigte raak. Die wapenrustings verskil?

Harry let ook op dat die kasteel ekstraskoon gemaak word. Verskeie smerige portrette word geskrop, tot ergernis van hul bewoners wat op ’n houpie in hul rame sit en brom blink skielik en beweeg sonder om te skwiek en Argus Fillis, die opsigter, gaan so erg te kere met die studente wat nie hul voete afvee nie dat ’n paar eerstejaarmeisies histeries word.

Ander personeellede is ook vreemd gespanne.

“Loggerenberg, moet tog *asseblief* nie voor enigiemand van Durmstrang laat blyk dat jy nie eens ’n eenvoudige Omruiltowerspreuk kan doen nie!” blaf professor McGonagall aan die einde van ’n besonder moeilike les waartydens Neville sy eie ore per ongeluk op ’n kaktus oorplant het.

Toe hulle die oggend van die dertigste Oktober afgaan vir ontbyt, sien hulle dat die Groot Saal oornag versier is. Enorme sybaniere wat elk ’n Hogwartshuis verteenwoordig hang teen die mure – rooi met ’n goue leeu vir Griffindor, blou met ’n bronsarend vir Raweklou, geel met ’n swart ratel vir Hoesenproes en groen met ’n silwer slang vir Slibberin. Agter die onderwysers se tafel pryk die grootste banier van almal met die Hogwarts-wapenskild daarop: ’n leeu, arend, ratel en slang kom bymekaar om ’n groot letter “H”.

Harry, Ron en Hermien sien dadelik vir Fred en George by die Griffindortafel. Hulle sit weer eens, en hoogs ongewoon, apart van al die ander en gesels in gedempte stemme. Ron kies koers na hulle toe.

“Dis ’n ramp, dis wat,” sê George terneergedruk aan Fred, “maar as hy nie van aangesig tot aangesig met ons wil praat nie, sal ons die brief na alles tog vir hom moet stuur. Of ons prop dit in sy hand, hy kan ons nie vir altyd vermy nie.”

“Wie vermy julle?” vra Ron toe hy langs hulle gaan sit.

“Wens jy wil,” sê Fred, wat geïrriteerd lyk deur die onderbreking.

“Wat’s ’n ramp?” vra Ron vir George.

“Om ’n nuuskierige agie soos jy vir ’n broer te hê,” sê George.

“Het julle twee al enige idees oor die Drietowenaarstoernooi?” vra Harry. “Al gedink of julle gaan probeer inskryf of iets?”

“Ek het vir McGonagall gevra hoe die kampioene gekies word, maar sy wou nie sê nie,” sê George bitter. “Sy’t net vir my gesê ek moet stilbly en my wasbeer transfigureer.”

“Wonder wat die take gaan wees?” sê Ron peinsend. “Weet jy, ek wed ek sal dit kan doen, Harry, ons het al tevore gevaarlike goed reggekry . . .”

“Nie voor ’n hele paneel beoordelaars nie, o nee,” sê Fred. “McGonagall sê die kampioene kry punte vir hoe goed hulle elke taak doen.”

“Wie is die beoordelaars?” vra Harry.

“Wel, die hoofde van die deelnemende skole is altyd op die paneel,” sê Hermien en almal kyk effens verbaas na haar, “want al drie van hulle is beseer gedurende die Toernooi van 1792 toe die kampioene ’n basilisk moes vang en hy amok gemaak het.”

Toe sy merk dat almal na haar kyk, sê sy op haar gewone ongeduldige manier dat niemand anders ooit die boeke lees wat sy al gelees het nie. “Dis alles in *Hogwarts: ’n Geskiedenis*. Hoewel daardie boek uit die aard van die saak nie heeltemal betroubaar is nie. ’n *Hersiene Geskiedenis van Hogwarts* sal ’n meer akkurate titel wees, of ’n *Hoogs Bevoordeelde en Selektiewe Geskiedenis van Hogwarts wat die Minder Aangename Aspekte van die Skool Verbloem*.”

“Waaroor gaan jy nou weer aan?” vra Ron, hoewel Harry reken dat hy weet wat wag.

“Huiselwe!” sê Hermien hard en bewys daarmee vir Harry reg. “Nie een keer in meer as ’n duisend blaaie verwys *Hogwarts: ’n Geskiedenis* daarna dat ons almal medepligtig is aan die onderdrukking van ’n honderd slawe nie!”

Harry skud sy kop en hou hom met sy roereiers besig. Sy en Ron se gebrek aan entoesiasme het Hermien se vasberadenheid om geregtigheid vir die huiselwe na te streef nie in die minste gedemp nie. Hulle het wel elk twee Sekels betaal vir ’n S.P.O.E.G.-knopie, maar het dit net gedoen om haar stil te maak. Hul Sekels was egter vermors, want al wat hulle reggekry het, was om Hermien net nog meer uitgesproke te maak. Sedertdien verpes sy vir Harry en Ron om eerstens hul knopies te dra en daarna om die ander ouens te oorreed om dit ook te doen. Sy gaan self elke aand in Griffindor se geselskamer rond, pen mense vas en skud dan die kollekteerblikkie onder hul neuse rond.

“Julle besef natuurlik dat jul beddens oorgetrek word, jul vure aange-steek, jul klaskamers skoongemaak en jul kos gekook word deur ’n groep magiese kreature wat nie betaal word nie, maar slawe is?” sê sy gedurig met mening.

Sommige ouens soos Neville het betaal net sodat Hermien moet ophou

om na hulle te gluur. 'n Paar het effens geïnteresseerd geklink in wat sy te sê het, maar was onwillig om aktief by die veldtog betrokke te raak. Die meeste beskou die hele ding as 'n grap.

Ron rol nou sy oë na die plafon van waar die herfsson oor hulle spoel en Fred raak verskriklik geïnteresseerd in sy spek (die tweeling het gewier om S.P.O.E.G.-knopies te koop). George leun egter oor na Hermien.

“Luister, was jy al ooit onder in die kombuis, Hermien?”

“Nee, natuurlik nie,” sê Hermien kortaf, “ek dink nie studente is veronderstel om –”

“Wel, ons was al,” sê George en beduie na Fred, “tonne kere, om kos te gaps. En ons het hulle al ontmoet en hulle is *gelukkig*. Hulle dink hulle het die beste jop in die wêreld –”

“Dis omdat hulle nie 'n opvoeding gehad het nie en gebreinspoel is!” begin Hermien ergerlik, maar haar woorde word verswelg deur 'n skielike suising van bo wat die aankoms van die posuile aankondig. Harry kyk dadelik op en sien dat Hedwig na hom toe aangevlieg kom. Hermien word dadelik stil; sy en Ron hou Hedwig gespanne dop toe sy na Harry se skouer fladder, haar vlerke toevou en haar been moeg uithou.

Harry haal Sirius se antwoord af en bied vir Hedwig sy spekrandjies aan wat sy met smaak verslind. Toe, nadat hy seker gemaak het dat Fred en George in hul gesprek oor die Drietowenaarstoernooi verdiep is, lees Harry Sirius se brief in 'n fluisterstem aan Ron en Hermien voor.

Oulike probeerslag, Harry.

Ek is terug in die land en goed versteek. Ek wil hê jy moet my op hoogte hou van wat by Hogwarts aangaan. Moenie vir Hedwig gebruik nie, wissel die uile gedurig af en moet jou nie oor my bekommer nie, wees net op jou hoede vir jouself. Moenie vergeet wat ek oor jou litteken gesê het nie.

Sirius

“Hoekom moet jy aanmekaar ander uile gebruik?” vra Ron in 'n gedempte stem.

“Hedwig sal te veel aandag trek,” sê Hermien dadelik. “Sy staan uit. 'n Sneeu-uil wat gedurig terugkeer na waar Sirius wegkruip . . . ek bedoel, hulle is nie inheemse voëls nie, is hulle?”

Harry rol die brief op en steek dit in sy kleed weg terwyl hy wonder of hy nou meer of minder besorg as tevore is. Dat Sirius dit reggekry het om terug te kom sonder dat hy gevang is, is darem iets. Hy kan egter nie ontken dat die gedagte dat Sirius baie nader is hom beter laat voel nie; ten minste hoef hy nie so lank vir 'n antwoord te wag elke keer dat hy skryf nie.

“Dankie, Hedwig,” sê hy terwyl hy haar streel. Sy hoe-hoe slaperig, dompel haar snawel vir ’n oomblik in sy beker met lemoensap en vlieg dan weer weg. Dit is duidelik dat sy na ’n lekker lang slapie in die Uilhuis uitsien.

Daardie dag is daar ’n heerlike gevoel van afwagting in die lug. Niemand gee veel aandag in die klas nie. Almal is baie meer geïnteresseerd in die aankoms die aand van die mense van Beauxbatons en Durmstrang; tot Towerdrankies is meer draaglik as gewoonlik siende dat dit ’n halfuur korter is. Toe die klok vroeg lui, haas Harry, Ron en Hermien hulle na die Griffindortoring, gooi hul tasse en boeke neer soos hulle aangesê is, trek hul mantels aan en storm af na die ingangsportaal toe.

Die hoofde van die onderskeie huise is besig om hul studente in rye te laat staan.

“Weasley, skuif jou hoed reg,” snou professor McGonagall vir Ron toe. “Juffrou Patel, haal daardie verspote ding uit jou hare.”

Parvati trek skewebek en haal ’n yslike ornamentele skoenlapper van die punt van haar vlegsel af.

“Volg my, asseblief,” sê professor McGonagall, “eerstejaars loop voor . . . moenie stoot nie . . .”

Hulle loop met die voorste trappe af en gaan staan in rye voor die kasteel. Dit is ’n koue, helder aand; dit word skemer en ’n bleek maan wat deurskynend lyk, skyn reeds oor die Verbode Woud. Harry, wat in die vierde ry van voor tussen Ron en Hermien staan, sien dat Dennis Creevey daar tussen die eerstejaars glad bewe van afwagting.

“Amper sesuur,” sê Ron terwyl hy na sy horlosie kyk en dan weer af in die rypad wat na die voorste hekke lei. “Hoe dink julle gaan hulle hier kom? Met die trein?”

“Ek twyfel,” sê Hermien.

“Hoe dan? Besemstokke?” stel Harry voor terwyl hy na die sterrelug kyk.

“Ek twyfel . . . nie van so ver af nie . . .”

“n Poortsleutel?” stel Ron voor. “Of dalk sal hulle appareer – dalk mag jy as jy onder sewentien is, daar waar hulle vandaan kom.”

“n Mens kan nie in Hogwarts se terrein appareer nie, hoeveel keer moet ek dit nog vir julle sê?” sê Hermien ongeduldig.

Hulle staar opgewonde oor die terrein wat al donkerder word, maar niks beweeg nie; alles is roerloos, doodstil en net soos altyd. Harry begin koud kry. Hy wens hulle wil opskud . . . dalk beplan die buitelandse studente ’n dramatiese aankoms . . . hy onthou skielik wat mn. Weasley op die kampeerterrein voor die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker gesê het – “Altyd dieselfde ding, kan nie anders as om te wil uithang wanneer ons bymekaarkom nie . . .”

Net toe roep Dompeldorius vanuit die agterste ry waar hy by die ander

onderwysers staan – “Aha! Tensy ek ’n baie groot fout maak, is die afvaartslip van Beauxbatons op pad!”

“Waar?” sê baie van die studente gretig terwyl hulle oral rondkyk.

“Daar!” gil ’n sesdejaar en wys na die Woud.

Iets groots, baie groter as ’n besemstok – of inderdaad, ’n honderd besemstokke – kom vanuit die diepblou lug bo die kasteel aangejaag. Dit word elke oomblik groter.

“Dis ’n draak!” skree een van die eerstejaars wat heeltemal kop verloor het.

“Moenie simpel wees nie . . . dis ’n vlieënde huis!” sê Dennis Creevey.

Dennis se raaskoot is nader aan die waarheid . . . toe die reuse- swart vorm oor die boomtoppe van die Verbode Woud skeer en die ligte wat deur die kasteel se vensters skyn daarop val, sien hulle ’n enorme, poeierblou koets so groot soos ’n huis wat deur die lug na hulle toe aangevlieg kom. Dit word deur ’n dosyn gevleuelde perde getrek, almal palomino’s wat so groot soos olifante is.

Die voorste drie rye studente val terug toe die koets laer en laer sak, teen ’n ysingwekkende spoed inkom om te land en toe – met ’n verskriklike slag wat Neville agteruit laat spring, reg op ’n Slibberin-vyfdejaar se voet – tref die perde se pote, wat groter as borde is, die grond. ’n Oomblik later land die koets bonsend op sy tamaai wiele terwyl die goue perde hul reusekoppe agteroor gooi en hul groot, vurige rooi oë rondrol.

Harry sien vlietend dat daar ’n wapenskild op die deur van die koets is (twee gekruiste goue towerstawwe elk met drie sterre aan die punt) voor dit oopgaan.

’n Seun in ’n bleekblou kleed spring uit die koets, buk oor, vroetel ’n rukkie met iets onderaan die koets en vou ’n stel goue trappe oop. Toe spring hy eerbiedig terug. Harry sien ’n blink hoëhakskoen wat vanuit die koets verskyn – dis ’n skoen so groot soos ’n kind se slee – dit word feitlik dadelik gevolg deur die grootste vrou wat hy nog ooit gesien het. Die rede hoekom die koets en perde so groot is, is onmiddellik duidelik. ’n Paar mense snak hoorbaar na asem.

In sy lewe het Harry nog net een persoon gesien wat so groot soos hierdie vrou is en dit is Hagrid; hy twyfel of daar enige verskil in hul lengtes is. Tog voel dit op die een of ander manier – dalk bloot omdat hy aan Hagrid gewoond is – asof hierdie vrou (wat nou aan die voet van die trappe staan en na die wagtende, wydogige skare kyk) selfs nog meer onnatuurlik groot is. Toe sy in die lig tree wat uit die ingangsportaal val, blyk dit dat sy ’n aantreklike, olyfkleurige gesig het, groot blinkswart oë en ’n ietwat krom neus. Haar hare is teruggetrek in ’n glinsterende bolla onderin haar nek. Sy is van kop tot tone geklee in swart satyn en talle manjifieke opale glinster om haar hals en aan haar dik vingers.

Dompeldorius begin hande klap; die studente volg sy voorbeeld en

gaan ook aan die klap, baie van hulle staan op hul tone om die vrou beter te kan sien.

Haar gesig ontspan in 'n hoflike glimlag en sy stap na Dompeldorius terwyl sy 'n glinsterende hand na hom uithou. Dompeldorius, wat self lank is, hoef kwalik te buig om dit te soen.

“My liewe Madame Maxine,” sê hy. “Welkom by Hogwarts.”

“Domplie-dorr,” sê Madame Maxine in 'n diep stem. “Ek 'oop jy is wel?”

“O, uitstekend, dankie,” sê Dompeldorius.

“My leerlinge,” sê Madame Maxine en wuif met een van haar enorme hande onverskillig na agter.

Harry, wie se aandag nog steeds ten volle by Madame Maxine was, sien nou dat ongeveer 'n dosyn seuns en dogters – almal, so lyk dit, in hul laat tienerjare – uit die koets geklim het en nou agter Madame Maxine staan. Hulle bibber van koue en dis nie verbasend nie, want dit lyk of hul klere van die fynste sy gemaak is en nie een van hulle dra 'n mantel nie. 'n Paar het serpe en sjaals om hul koppe gedraai. Vir sover Harry kan sien (want hulle staan in Madame Maxine se enorme skaduwee), staan hulle met uitdrukkings van gespanne afwagting op hul gesigte na Hogwarts.

“Het Karkaroff al 'earriveer?” vra Madame Maxine.

“Hy behoort enige oomblik hier te wees,” sê Dompeldorius. “Wil jy hier wag om hom te groet of wil julle eerder solank inkom en 'n bietjie warm word?”

“Warm word,” sê Madame Maxine. “Dis net, die perde . . .”

“Ons onderwyser vir die Versorging van Magiese Kreature sal hulle met plesier versorg,” sê Dompeldorius, “sodra hy 'n geringe aangeleentheid rakende sommige van sy ander – h'm – belange hanteer het.”

“Krewels,” mompel Ron grinnikend teenoor Harry.

“My rosse benodig – e – krag by die hantering,” sê Madame Maxine en dit lyk asof sy twyfel of enige onderwyser vir die Versorging van Magiese Kreature by Hogwarts daartoe in staat sal wees. “Hulle is geweldig sterk . . .”

“Ek verseker jou dat Hagrid hulle goed sal kan hanteer,” sê Dompeldorius glimlaggend.

“Goed dan,” sê Madame Maxine en buig so effens, “as jy asseblief vir hierdie 'Agrid sal sê dat die rosse slegs enkelmoutwhisky drink?”

“Dit sal gedoen word,” sê Dompeldorius en buig ook.

“Kom,” sê Madame Maxine met groot waardigheid aan haar studente, en die Hogwarts-studente staan opsy om hulle deur te laat sodat hulle met die kliptrappe langs boontoe kan loop.

“Hoe groot dink julle gaan Durmstrang se perde wees?” sê Septimus Floris en leun oor Hildegard en Parvati om met Ron en Harry te kan praat.

“Wel, as hulle hoegenaamd groter as hierdie spul is, sal selfs Hagrid hulle nie kan beheer nie,” sê Harry. “Dis nou mits die Krewels hom nie reeds aangeval het nie. Ek wonder wat gaan met hulle aan?”

“Dalk het hulle ontsnap,” sê Ron hoopvol.

“O, moenie sulke goed sê nie,” sê Hermien sidderend. “Dink net aan daardie goed los op die terrein . . .”

Nou bewe hulle effens terwyl hulle wag dat Durmstrang se geselskap moet opdaag. Die meeste mense staar hoopvol in die lug op. Vir ’n paar minute word die stilte slegs deur die geproes en gestamp van Madame Maxine se enorme perde verbreek. Maar toe –

“Kan julle iets hoor?” sê Ron skielik.

Harry luister; ’n harde en vreemd grilligerige geluid kom vanuit die duisternis na hulle toe aangesweef, ’n gesmoorde rammelende suiggeluid asof ’n tamaai stofsuiers al met ’n rivierbed langs beweeg.

“Die meer!” skree Lee Jordaan en wys daarna. “Kyk na die meer!”

Van waar hulle staan, aan die bokant van die grasperke wat oor die terrein uitkyk, kan hulle die water se gladde blink oppervlak duidelik sien – behalwe dat die oppervlak skielik nie meer glad is nie. Diep in die middel is daar ’n versteuring; groot borrels vorm op die oppervlak, golwe spoel oor die modderige walle – en toe verskyn ’n draaikolk reg in die middel asof ’n enorme prop so pas uit die meer se bodem getrek is . . .

Wat na ’n lang swart paal lyk, begin om stadig uit die hart van die draaikolk te rys . . . en toe sien Harry die takelwerk . . .

“Dis ’n mas!” sê hy vir Ron en Hermien.

’n Skip wat in die maanlig glinster, rys stadig en op luisterryke wyse uit die waters. Dit het ’n vreemde skeletagtige voorkoms soos ’n wrak wat herry en die dowwe, mistige lig wat deur die patryspoorte val, lyk soos spookoë. Eindelik, met ’n harde slosj-geluid, verskyn die skip ten volle, dobber op die onstuimige water en begin dan om na die kant te gly. ’n Paar oomblikke later hoor hulle die plasgeluid van ’n anker wat in die vlak water gegooi word en die slag van ’n loopplank wat op die kant neersak.

Mense klim af; hulle sien hoe hul silhoeëtte verby die ligte in die skip se patryspoorte beweeg. Dit lyk vir Harry asof almal van hulle soos Krabbe en Goliath gebou is . . . maar toe hulle nader kom en oor die grasperk stap na die lig wat van die Ingangsportaal af stroom, sien hy dat hulle ’n soort ruie, gekoekte pels dra. Die man wat hulle na die kasteel lei, dra egter pelse van ’n heel ander aard, glad en silwer soos sy hare.

“Dompeldorius!” roep hy hartlik uit toe hy teen die helling uitstap. “Hoe gaan dit, my liewe vriend, hoe gaan dit?”

“Besonder goed, dankie, professor Karkaroff,” antwoord Dompeldorius.

Karkaroff het ’n pittige en vleierende stem; in die lig wat deur die kas-

teel se voordeure val, sien hulle dat hy lank en skraal soos Dompeldorius is, maar dat sy wit hare kort is en dat sy bokbaardjie (wat in 'n klein krul-letjie eindig) sy effense swak ken nie heeltemal verbloem nie. Toe hy by Dompeldorius kom, vou hy sy hand in albei syne toe.

“Liewe ou Hogwarts,” sê hy terwyl hy glimlaggend na die kasteel kyk. Sy tande is geel en Harry sien dat sy glimlag nie sy oë bereik nie. Hulle bly geslepe en koud. “Hoe lekker is dit nie om hier te wees nie, hoe lekker . . . Viktor, kom hier waar dit warm is . . . Jy gee nie om nie, nè, Dompeldorius? Viktor het 'n effense verkoue . . .”

Karkaroff wuif een van sy leerlinge nader. Toe die seun verbystap, kry Harry 'n glimp van 'n groot haakneus en woeste swart wenkbroue. Hy het nie die stamp teen sy arm van Ron of die gesis in sy oor nodig om daardie profiel te herken nie.

“Harry – *dis Krum!*”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



THE GOBLET OF FIRE

I don't believe it!" Ron said, in a stunned voice, as the Hogwarts students filed back up the steps behind the party from Durmstrang. "Krum, Harry! *Viktor Krum!*"

"For heaven's sake, Ron, he's only a Quidditch player," said Hermione.

"*Only a Quidditch player?*" Ron said, looking at her as though he couldn't believe his ears. "Hermione — he's one of the best Seekers in the world! I had no idea he was still at school!"

As they recrossed the entrance hall with the rest of the Hogwarts students heading for the Great Hall, Harry saw Lee Jordan jumping up and down on the soles of his feet to get a better look at the back of

Krum's head. Several sixth-year girls were frantically searching their pockets as they walked —

“Oh I don't believe it, I haven't got a single quill on me —”

“D'you think he'd sign my hat in lipstick?”

“*Really*,” Hermione said loftily as they passed the girls, now squabbling over the lipstick.

“*I'm* getting his autograph if I can,” said Ron. “You haven't got a quill, have you, Harry?”

“Nope, they're upstairs in my bag,” said Harry.

They walked over to the Gryffindor table and sat down. Ron took care to sit on the side facing the doorway, because Krum and his fellow Durmstrang students were still gathered around it, apparently unsure about where they should sit. The students from Beauxbatons had chosen seats at the Ravenclaw table. They were looking around the Great Hall with glum expressions on their faces. Three of them were still clutching scarves and shawls around their heads.

“It's not *that* cold,” said Hermione defensively. “Why didn't they bring cloaks?”

“Over here! Come and sit over here!” Ron hissed. “Over here! Hermione, budge up, make a space —”

“What?”

“Too late,” said Ron bitterly.

Viktor Krum and his fellow Durmstrang students had settled themselves at the Slytherin table. Harry could see Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle looking very smug about this. As he watched, Malfoy bent forward to speak to Krum.

“Yeah, that's right, smarm up to him, Malfoy,” said Ron scathingly.

“I bet Krum can see right through him, though . . . bet he gets people fawning over him all the time. . . . Where d’you reckon they’re going to sleep? We could offer him a space in our dormitory, Harry . . . I wouldn’t mind giving him my bed, I could kip on a camp bed.”

Hermione snorted.

“They look a lot happier than the Beauxbatons lot,” said Harry.

The Durmstrang students were pulling off their heavy furs and looking up at the starry black ceiling with expressions of interest; a couple of them were picking up the golden plates and goblets and examining them, apparently impressed.

Up at the staff table, Filch, the caretaker, was adding chairs. He was wearing his moldy old tailcoat in honor of the occasion. Harry was surprised to see that he added four chairs, two on either side of Dumbledore’s.

“But there are only two extra people,” Harry said. “Why’s Filch putting out four chairs, who else is coming?”

“Eh?” said Ron vaguely. He was still staring avidly at Krum.

When all the students had entered the Hall and settled down at their House tables, the staff entered, filing up to the top table and taking their seats. Last in line were Professor Dumbledore, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime. When their headmistress appeared, the pupils from Beauxbatons leapt to their feet. A few of the Hogwarts students laughed. The Beauxbatons party appeared quite unembarrassed, however, and did not resume their seats until Madame Maxime had sat down on Dumbledore’s left-hand side. Dumbledore remained standing, and a silence fell over the Great Hall.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, ghosts and — most particularly — guests,” said Dumbledore, beaming around at the foreign students. “I have great pleasure in welcoming you all to Hogwarts. I hope and trust that your stay here will be both comfortable and enjoyable.”

One of the Beauxbatons girls still clutching a muffler around her head gave what was unmistakably a derisive laugh.

“No one’s making you stay!” Hermione whispered, bristling at her.

“The tournament will be officially opened at the end of the feast,” said Dumbledore. “I now invite you all to eat, drink, and make yourselves at home!”

He sat down, and Harry saw Karkaroff lean forward at once and engage him in conversation.

The plates in front of them filled with food as usual. The house-elves in the kitchen seemed to have pulled out all the stops; there was a greater variety of dishes in front of them than Harry had ever seen, including several that were definitely foreign.

“What’s *that*?” said Ron, pointing at a large dish of some sort of shellfish stew that stood beside a large steak-and-kidney pudding.

“Bouillabaisse,” said Hermione.

“Bless you,” said Ron.

“It’s *French*,” said Hermione, “I had it on holiday summer before last. It’s very nice.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” said Ron, helping himself to black pudding.

The Great Hall seemed somehow much more crowded than usual, even though there were barely twenty additional students there;

perhaps it was because their differently colored uniforms stood out so clearly against the black of the Hogwarts robes. Now that they had removed their furs, the Durmstrang students were revealed to be wearing robes of a deep bloodred.

Hagrid sidled into the Hall through a door behind the staff table twenty minutes after the start of the feast. He slid into his seat at the end and waved at Harry, Ron, and Hermione with a very heavily bandaged hand.

“Skrewts doing all right, Hagrid?” Harry called.

“Thrivin’,” Hagrid called back happily.

“Yeah, I’ll just bet they are,” said Ron quietly. “Looks like they’ve finally found a food they like, doesn’t it? Hagrid’s fingers.”

At that moment, a voice said, “Excuse me, are you wanting ze bouillabaisse?”

It was the girl from Beauxbatons who had laughed during Dumbledore’s speech. She had finally removed her muffler. A long sheet of silvery-blond hair fell almost to her waist. She had large, deep blue eyes, and very white, even teeth.

Ron went purple. He stared up at her, opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out except a faint gurgling noise.

“Yeah, have it,” said Harry, pushing the dish toward the girl.

“You ’ave finished wiz it?”

“Yeah,” Ron said breathlessly. “Yeah, it was excellent.”

The girl picked up the dish and carried it carefully off to the Ravenclaw table. Ron was still goggling at the girl as though he had never seen one before. Harry started to laugh. The sound seemed to jog Ron back to his senses.

“She’s a *veela*!” he said hoarsely to Harry.

“Of course she isn’t!” said Hermione tartly. “I don’t see anyone else gaping at her like an idiot!”

But she wasn’t entirely right about that. As the girl crossed the Hall, many boys’ heads turned, and some of them seemed to have become temporarily speechless, just like Ron.

“I’m telling you, that’s not a normal girl!” said Ron, leaning sideways so he could keep a clear view of her. “They don’t make them like that at Hogwarts!”

“They make them okay at Hogwarts,” said Harry without thinking. Cho happened to be sitting only a few places away from the girl with the silvery hair.

“When you’ve both put your eyes back in,” said Hermione briskly, “you’ll be able to see who’s just arrived.”

She was pointing up at the staff table. The two remaining empty seats had just been filled. Ludo Bagman was now sitting on Professor Karkaroff’s other side, while Mr. Crouch, Percy’s boss, was next to Madame Maxime.

“What are *they* doing here?” said Harry in surprise.

“They organized the Triwizard Tournament, didn’t they?” said Hermione. “I suppose they wanted to be here to see it start.”

When the second course arrived they noticed a number of unfamiliar desserts too. Ron examined an odd sort of pale blancmange closely, then moved it carefully a few inches to his right, so that it would be clearly visible from the Ravenclaw table. The girl who looked like a veela appeared to have eaten enough, however, and did not come over to get it.

Once the golden plates had been wiped clean, Dumbledore stood up again. A pleasant sort of tension seemed to fill the Hall now. Harry felt a slight thrill of excitement, wondering what was coming. Several seats down from them, Fred and George were leaning forward, staring at Dumbledore with great concentration.

“The moment has come,” said Dumbledore, smiling around at the sea of upturned faces. “The Triwizard Tournament is about to start. I would like to say a few words of explanation before we bring in the casket —”

“The what?” Harry muttered.

Ron shrugged.

“— just to clarify the procedure that we will be following this year. But first, let me introduce, for those who do not know them, Mr. Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation” — there was a smattering of polite applause — “and Mr. Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports.”

There was a much louder round of applause for Bagman than for Crouch, perhaps because of his fame as a Beater, or simply because he looked so much more likable. He acknowledged it with a jovial wave of his hand. Bartemius Crouch did not smile or wave when his name was announced. Remembering him in his neat suit at the Quidditch World Cup, Harry thought he looked strange in wizard’s robes. His toothbrush mustache and severe parting looked very odd next to Dumbledore’s long white hair and beard.

“Mr. Bagman and Mr. Crouch have worked tirelessly over the last few months on the arrangements for the Triwizard Tournament,”

Dumbledore continued, “and they will be joining myself, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime on the panel that will judge the champions’ efforts.”

At the mention of the word “champions,” the attentiveness of the listening students seemed to sharpen. Perhaps Dumbledore had noticed their sudden stillness, for he smiled as he said, “The casket, then, if you please, Mr. Filch.”

Filch, who had been lurking unnoticed in a far corner of the Hall, now approached Dumbledore carrying a great wooden chest encrusted with jewels. It looked extremely old. A murmur of excited interest rose from the watching students; Dennis Creevey actually stood on his chair to see it properly, but, being so tiny, his head hardly rose above anyone else’s.

“The instructions for the tasks the champions will face this year have already been examined by Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman,” said Dumbledore as Filch placed the chest carefully on the table before him, “and they have made the necessary arrangements for each challenge. There will be three tasks, spaced throughout the school year, and they will test the champions in many different ways . . . their magical prowess — their daring — their powers of deduction — and, of course, their ability to cope with danger.”

At this last word, the Hall was filled with a silence so absolute that nobody seemed to be breathing.

“As you know, three champions compete in the tournament,” Dumbledore went on calmly, “one from each of the participating schools. They will be marked on how well they perform each of the tournament tasks and the champion with the highest total after task

three will win the Triwizard Cup. The champions will be chosen by an impartial selector: the Goblet of Fire.”

Dumbledore now took out his wand and tapped three times upon the top of the casket. The lid creaked slowly open. Dumbledore reached inside it and pulled out a large, roughly hewn wooden cup. It would have been entirely unremarkable had it not been full to the brim with dancing blue-white flames.

Dumbledore closed the casket and placed the goblet carefully on top of it, where it would be clearly visible to everyone in the Hall.

“Anybody wishing to submit themselves as champion must write their name and school clearly upon a slip of parchment and drop it into the goblet,” said Dumbledore. “Aspiring champions have twenty-four hours in which to put their names forward. Tomorrow night, Halloween, the goblet will return the names of the three it has judged most worthy to represent their schools. The goblet will be placed in the entrance hall tonight, where it will be freely accessible to all those wishing to compete.

“To ensure that no underage student yields to temptation,” said Dumbledore, “I will be drawing an Age Line around the Goblet of Fire once it has been placed in the entrance hall. Nobody under the age of seventeen will be able to cross this line.

“Finally, I wish to impress upon any of you wishing to compete that this tournament is not to be entered into lightly. Once a champion has been selected by the Goblet of Fire, he or she is obliged to see the tournament through to the end. The placing of your name in the goblet constitutes a binding, magical contract. There can be no change of heart once you have become a champion. Please be very

sure, therefore, that you are wholeheartedly prepared to play before you drop your name into the goblet. Now, I think it is time for bed. Good night to you all.”

“An Age Line!” Fred Weasley said, his eyes glinting, as they all made their way across the Hall to the doors into the entrance hall. “Well, that should be fooled by an Aging Potion, shouldn’t it? And once your name’s in that goblet, you’re laughing — it can’t tell whether you’re seventeen or not!”

“But I don’t think anyone under seventeen will stand a chance,” said Hermione, “we just haven’t learned enough . . .”

“Speak for yourself,” said George shortly. “You’ll try and get in, won’t you, Harry?”

Harry thought briefly of Dumbledore’s insistence that nobody under seventeen should submit their name, but then the wonderful picture of himself winning the Triwizard Tournament filled his mind again. . . . He wondered how angry Dumbledore would be if someone younger than seventeen *did* find a way to get over the Age Line. . . .

“Where is he?” said Ron, who wasn’t listening to a word of this conversation, but looking through the crowd to see what had become of Krum. “Dumbledore didn’t say where the Durmstrang people are sleeping, did he?”

But this query was answered almost instantly; they were level with the Slytherin table now, and Karkaroff had just bustled up to his students.

“Back to the ship, then,” he was saying. “Viktor, how are you feeling? Did you eat enough? Should I send for some mulled wine

from the kitchens?”

Harry saw Krum shake his head as he pulled his furs back on.

“Professor, *I* vood like some vine,” said one of the other Durmstrang boys hopefully.

“I wasn’t offering it to *you*, Poliakoff,” snapped Karkaroff, his warmly paternal air vanishing in an instant. “I notice you have dribbled food all down the front of your robes again, disgusting boy ____”

Karkaroff turned and led his students toward the doors, reaching them at exactly the same moment as Harry, Ron, and Hermione. Harry stopped to let him walk through first.

“Thank you,” said Karkaroff carelessly, glancing at him.

And then Karkaroff froze. He turned his head back to Harry and stared at him as though he couldn’t believe his eyes. Behind their headmaster, the students from Durmstrang came to a halt too. Karkaroff’s eyes moved slowly up Harry’s face and fixed upon his scar. The Durmstrang students were staring curiously at Harry too. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw comprehension dawn on a few of their faces. The boy with food all down his front nudged the girl next to him and pointed openly at Harry’s forehead.

“Yeah, that’s Harry Potter,” said a growling voice from behind them.

Professor Karkaroff spun around. Mad-Eye Moody was standing there, leaning heavily on his staff, his magical eye glaring unblinkingly at the Durmstrang headmaster.

The color drained from Karkaroff’s face as Harry watched. A terrible look of mingled fury and fear came over him.

“You!” he said, staring at Moody as though unsure he was really seeing him.

“Me,” said Moody grimly. “And unless you’ve got anything to say to Potter, Karkaroff, you might want to move. You’re blocking the doorway.”

It was true; half the students in the Hall were now waiting behind them, looking over one another’s shoulders to see what was causing the holdup.

Without another word, Professor Karkaroff swept his students away with him. Moody watched him until he was out of sight, his magical eye fixed upon his back, a look of intense dislike upon his mutilated face.

As the next day was Saturday, most students would normally have breakfasted late. Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, were not alone in rising much earlier than they usually did on weekends. When they went down into the entrance hall, they saw about twenty people milling around it, some of them eating toast, all examining the Goblet of Fire. It had been placed in the center of the hall on the stool that normally bore the Sorting Hat. A thin golden line had been traced on the floor, forming a circle ten feet around it in every direction.

“Anyone put their name in yet?” Ron asked a third-year girl eagerly.

“All the Durmstrang lot,” she replied. “But I haven’t seen anyone from Hogwarts yet.”

“Bet some of them put it in last night after we’d all gone to bed,” said Harry. “I would’ve if it had been me . . . wouldn’t have wanted

everyone watching. What if the goblet just gobbled you right back out again?”

Someone laughed behind Harry. Turning, he saw Fred, George, and Lee Jordan hurrying down the staircase, all three of them looking extremely excited.

“Done it,” Fred said in a triumphant whisper to Harry, Ron, and Hermione. “Just taken it.”

“What?” said Ron.

“The Aging Potion, dung brains,” said Fred.

“One drop each,” said George, rubbing his hands together with glee. “We only need to be a few months older.”

“We’re going to split the thousand Galleons between the three of us if one of us wins,” said Lee, grinning broadly.

“I’m not sure this is going to work, you know,” said Hermione warningly. “I’m sure Dumbledore will have thought of this.”

Fred, George, and Lee ignored her.

“Ready?” Fred said to the other two, quivering with excitement. “C’mon, then — I’ll go first —”

Harry watched, fascinated, as Fred pulled a slip of parchment out of his pocket bearing the words *Fred Weasley — Hogwarts*. Fred walked right up to the edge of the line and stood there, rocking on his toes like a diver preparing for a fifty-foot drop. Then, with the eyes of every person in the entrance hall upon him, he took a great breath and stepped over the line.

For a split second Harry thought it had worked — George certainly thought so, for he let out a yell of triumph and leapt after Fred — but next moment, there was a loud sizzling sound, and both

twins were hurled out of the golden circle as though they had been thrown by an invisible shot-putter. They landed painfully, ten feet away on the cold stone floor, and to add insult to injury, there was a loud popping noise, and both of them sprouted identical long white beards.

The entrance hall rang with laughter. Even Fred and George joined in, once they had gotten to their feet and taken a good look at each other's beards.

"I did warn you," said a deep, amused voice, and everyone turned to see Professor Dumbledore coming out of the Great Hall. He surveyed Fred and George, his eyes twinkling. "I suggest you both go up to Madam Pomfrey. She is already tending to Miss Fawcett, of Ravenclaw, and Mr. Summers, of Hufflepuff, both of whom decided to age themselves up a little too. Though I must say, neither of their beards is anything like as fine as yours."

Fred and George set off for the hospital wing, accompanied by Lee, who was howling with laughter, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione, also chortling, went in to breakfast.

The decorations in the Great Hall had changed this morning. As it was Halloween, a cloud of live bats was fluttering around the enchanted ceiling, while hundreds of carved pumpkins leered from every corner. Harry led the way over to Dean and Seamus, who were discussing those Hogwarts students of seventeen or over who might be entering.

"There's a rumor going around that Warrington got up early and put his name in," Dean told Harry. "That big bloke from Slytherin who looks like a sloth."

Harry, who had played Quidditch against Warrington, shook his head in disgust.

“We can’t have a Slytherin champion!”

“And all the Hufflepuffs are talking about Diggory,” said Seamus contemptuously. “But I wouldn’t have thought he’d have wanted to risk his good looks.”

“Listen!” said Hermione suddenly.

People were cheering out in the entrance hall. They all swiveled around in their seats and saw Angelina Johnson coming into the Hall, grinning in an embarrassed sort of way. A tall black girl who played Chaser on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, Angelina came over to them, sat down, and said, “Well, I’ve done it! Just put my name in!”

“You’re kidding!” said Ron, looking impressed.

“Are you seventeen, then?” asked Harry.

“Course she is, can’t see a beard, can you?” said Ron.

“I had my birthday last week,” said Angelina.

“Well, I’m glad someone from Gryffindor’s entering,” said Hermione. “I really hope you get it, Angelina!”

“Thanks, Hermione,” said Angelina, smiling at her.

“Yeah, better you than Pretty-Boy Diggory,” said Seamus, causing several Hufflepuffs passing their table to scowl heavily at him.

“What’re we going to do today, then?” Ron asked Harry and Hermione when they had finished breakfast and were leaving the Great Hall.

“We haven’t been down to visit Hagrid yet,” said Harry.

“Okay,” said Ron, “just as long as he doesn’t ask us to donate a

few fingers to the skrewts.”

A look of great excitement suddenly dawned on Hermione’s face.

“I’ve just realized — I haven’t asked Hagrid to join S.P.E.W. yet!” she said brightly. “Wait for me, will you, while I nip upstairs and get the badges?”

“What is it with her?” said Ron, exasperated, as Hermione ran away up the marble staircase.

“Hey, Ron,” said Harry suddenly. “It’s your friend . . .”

The students from Beauxbatons were coming through the front doors from the grounds, among them, the veela-girl. Those gathered around the Goblet of Fire stood back to let them pass, watching eagerly.

Madame Maxime entered the hall behind her students and organized them into a line. One by one, the Beauxbatons students stepped across the Age Line and dropped their slips of parchment into the blue-white flames. As each name entered the fire, it turned briefly red and emitted sparks.

“What d’you reckon’ll happen to the ones who aren’t chosen?” Ron muttered to Harry as the veela-girl dropped her parchment into the Goblet of Fire. “Reckon they’ll go back to school, or hang around to watch the tournament?”

“Dunno,” said Harry. “Hang around, I suppose. . . . Madame Maxime’s staying to judge, isn’t she?”

When all the Beauxbatons students had submitted their names, Madame Maxime led them back out of the hall and out onto the grounds again.

“Where are *they* sleeping, then?” said Ron, moving toward the

front doors and staring after them.

A loud rattling noise behind them announced Hermione's reappearance with the box of S.P.E.W. badges.

"Oh good, hurry up," said Ron, and he jumped down the stone steps, keeping his eyes on the back of the veela-girl, who was now halfway across the lawn with Madame Maxime.

As they neared Hagrid's cabin on the edge of the Forbidden Forest, the mystery of the Beauxbatons' sleeping quarters was solved. The gigantic powder-blue carriage in which they had arrived had been parked two hundred yards from Hagrid's front door, and the students were climbing back inside it. The elephantine flying horses that had pulled the carriage were now grazing in a makeshift paddock alongside it.

Harry knocked on Hagrid's door, and Fang's booming barks answered instantly.

"'Bout time!" said Hagrid, when he'd flung open the door. "Thought you lot'd forgotten where I live!"

"We've been really busy, Hag —" Hermione started to say, but then she stopped dead, looking up at Hagrid, apparently lost for words.

Hagrid was wearing his best (and very horrible) hairy brown suit, plus a checked yellow-and-orange tie. This wasn't the worst of it, though; he had evidently tried to tame his hair, using large quantities of what appeared to be axle grease. It was now slicked down into two bunches — perhaps he had tried a ponytail like Bill's, but found he had too much hair. The look didn't really suit Hagrid at all. For a moment, Hermione goggled at him, then, obviously deciding not to

comment, she said, “Erm — where are the skrewts?”

“Out by the pumpkin patch,” said Hagrid happily. “They’re gettin’ massive, mus’ be nearly three foot long now. On’y trouble is, they’ve started killin’ each other.”

“Oh no, really?” said Hermione, shooting a repressive look at Ron, who, staring at Hagrid’s odd hairstyle, had just opened his mouth to say something about it.

“Yeah,” said Hagrid sadly. “’S’ okay, though, I’ve got ’em in separate boxes now. Still got abou’ twenty.”

“Well, that’s lucky,” said Ron. Hagrid missed the sarcasm.

Hagrid’s cabin comprised a single room, in one corner of which was a gigantic bed covered in a patchwork quilt. A similarly enormous wooden table and chairs stood in front of the fire beneath the quantity of cured hams and dead birds hanging from the ceiling. They sat down at the table while Hagrid started to make tea, and were soon immersed in yet more discussion of the Triwizard Tournament. Hagrid seemed quite as excited about it as they were.

“You wait,” he said, grinning. “You jus’ wait. Yer going ter see some stuff yeh’ve never seen before. Firs’ task . . . ah, but I’m not supposed ter say.”

“Go on, Hagrid!” Harry, Ron, and Hermione urged him, but he just shook his head, grinning.

“I don’ want ter spoil it fer yeh,” said Hagrid. “But it’s gonna be spectacular, I’ll tell yeh that. Them champions’re going ter have their work cut out. Never thought I’d live ter see the Triwizard Tournament played again!”

They ended up having lunch with Hagrid, though they didn’t eat

much — Hagrid had made what he said was a beef casserole, but after Hermione unearthed a large talon in hers, she, Harry, and Ron rather lost their appetites. However, they enjoyed themselves trying to make Hagrid tell them what the tasks in the tournament were going to be, speculating which of the entrants were likely to be selected as champions, and wondering whether Fred and George were beardless yet.

A light rain had started to fall by midafternoon; it was very cozy sitting by the fire, listening to the gentle patter of the drops on the window, watching Hagrid darning his socks and arguing with Hermione about house-elves — for he flatly refused to join S.P.E.W. when she showed him her badges.

“It’d be doin’ ’em an unkindness, Hermione,” he said gravely, threading a massive bone needle with thick yellow yarn. “It’s in their nature ter look after humans, that’s what they like, see? Yeh’d be makin’ ’em unhappy ter take away their work, an’ insultin’ ’em if yeh tried ter pay ’em.”

“But Harry set Dobby free, and he was over the moon about it!” said Hermione. “*And* we heard he’s asking for wages now!”

“Yeah, well, yeh get weirdos in every breed. I’m not sayin’ there isn’t the odd elf who’d take freedom, but yeh’ll never persuade most of ’em ter do it — no, nothin’ doin’, Hermione.”

Hermione looked very cross indeed and stuffed her box of badges back into her cloak pocket.

By half past five it was growing dark, and Ron, Harry, and Hermione decided it was time to get back up to the castle for the Halloween feast — and, more important, the announcement of the

school champions.

“I’ll come with yeh,” said Hagrid, putting away his darning. “Jus’ give us a sec.”

Hagrid got up, went across to the chest of drawers beside his bed, and began searching for something inside it. They didn’t pay too much attention until a truly horrible smell reached their nostrils. Coughing, Ron said, “Hagrid, what’s that?”

“Eh?” said Hagrid, turning around with a large bottle in his hand. “Don’ yeh like it?”

“Is that aftershave?” said Hermione in a slightly choked voice.

“Er — eau de cologne,” Hagrid muttered. He was blushing. “Maybe it’s a bit much,” he said gruffly. “I’ll go take it off, hang on . . .”

He stumped out of the cabin, and they saw him washing himself vigorously in the water barrel outside the window.

“Eau de cologne?” said Hermione in amazement. “*Hagrid?*”

“And what’s with the hair and the suit?” said Harry in an undertone.

“Look!” said Ron suddenly, pointing out of the window.

Hagrid had just straightened up and turned ’round. If he had been blushing before, it was nothing to what he was doing now. Getting to their feet very cautiously, so that Hagrid wouldn’t spot them, Harry, Ron, and Hermione peered through the window and saw that Madame Maxime and the Beauxbatons students had just emerged from their carriage, clearly about to set off for the feast too. They couldn’t hear what Hagrid was saying, but he was talking to Madame Maxime with a rapt, misty-eyed expression Harry had only ever seen

him wear once before — when he had been looking at the baby dragon, Norbert.

“He’s going up to the castle with her!” said Hermione indignantly. “I thought he was waiting for us!”

Without so much as a backward glance at his cabin, Hagrid was trudging off up the grounds with Madame Maxime, the Beauxbatons students following in their wake, jogging to keep up with their enormous strides.

“He fancies her!” said Ron incredulously. “Well, if they end up having children, they’ll be setting a world record — bet any baby of theirs would weigh about a ton.”

They let themselves out of the cabin and shut the door behind them. It was surprisingly dark outside. Drawing their cloaks more closely around themselves, they set off up the sloping lawns.

“Ooh it’s them, look!” Hermione whispered.

The Durmstrang party was walking up toward the castle from the lake. Viktor Krum was walking side by side with Karkaroff, and the other Durmstrang students were straggling along behind them. Ron watched Krum excitedly, but Krum did not look around as he reached the front doors a little ahead of Hermione, Ron, and Harry and proceeded through them.

When they entered the candlelit Great Hall it was almost full. The Goblet of Fire had been moved; it was now standing in front of Dumbledore’s empty chair at the teachers’ table. Fred and George — clean-shaven again — seemed to have taken their disappointment fairly well.

“Hope it’s Angelina,” said Fred as Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat

down.

“So do I!” said Hermione breathlessly. “Well, we’ll soon know!”

The Halloween feast seemed to take much longer than usual. Perhaps because it was their second feast in two days, Harry didn’t seem to fancy the extravagantly prepared food as much as he would have normally. Like everyone else in the Hall, judging by the constantly craning necks, the impatient expressions on every face, the fidgeting, and the standing up to see whether Dumbledore had finished eating yet, Harry simply wanted the plates to clear, and to hear who had been selected as champions.

At long last, the golden plates returned to their original spotless state; there was a sharp upswing in the level of noise within the Hall, which died away almost instantly as Dumbledore got to his feet. On either side of him, Professor Karkaroff and Madame Maxime looked as tense and expectant as anyone. Ludo Bagman was beaming and winking at various students. Mr. Crouch, however, looked quite uninterested, almost bored.

“Well, the goblet is almost ready to make its decision,” said Dumbledore. “I estimate that it requires one more minute. Now, when the champions’ names are called, I would ask them please to come up to the top of the Hall, walk along the staff table, and go through into the next chamber” — he indicated the door behind the staff table — “where they will be receiving their first instructions.”

He took out his wand and gave a great sweeping wave with it; at once, all the candles except those inside the carved pumpkins were extinguished, plunging them into a state of semidarkness. The Goblet of Fire now shone more brightly than anything in the whole Hall, the

sparkling bright, bluey-whiteness of the flames almost painful on the eyes. Everyone watched, waiting. . . . A few people kept checking their watches. . . .

“Any second,” Lee Jordan whispered, two seats away from Harry.

The flames inside the goblet turned suddenly red again. Sparks began to fly from it. Next moment, a tongue of flame shot into the air, a charred piece of parchment fluttered out of it — the whole room gasped.

Dumbledore caught the piece of parchment and held it at arm’s length, so that he could read it by the light of the flames, which had turned back to blue-white.

“The champion for Durmstrang,” he read, in a strong, clear voice, “will be Viktor Krum.”

“No surprises there!” yelled Ron as a storm of applause and cheering swept the Hall. Harry saw Viktor Krum rise from the Slytherin table and slouch up toward Dumbledore; he turned right, walked along the staff table, and disappeared through the door into the next chamber.

“Bravo, Viktor!” boomed Karkaroff, so loudly that everyone could hear him, even over all the applause. “Knew you had it in you!”

The clapping and chatting died down. Now everyone’s attention was focused again on the goblet, which, seconds later, turned red once more. A second piece of parchment shot out of it, propelled by the flames.

“The champion for Beauxbatons,” said Dumbledore, “is Fleur Delacour!”

“It’s her, Ron!” Harry shouted as the girl who so resembled a

veela got gracefully to her feet, shook back her sheet of silvery blonde hair, and swept up between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables.

“Oh look, they’re all disappointed,” Hermione said over the noise, nodding toward the remainder of the Beauxbatons party. “Disappointed” was a bit of an understatement, Harry thought. Two of the girls who had not been selected had dissolved into tears and were sobbing with their heads on their arms.

When Fleur Delacour too had vanished into the side chamber, silence fell again, but this time it was a silence so stiff with excitement you could almost taste it. The Hogwarts champion next . . .

And the Goblet of Fire turned red once more; sparks showered out of it; the tongue of flame shot high into the air, and from its tip Dumbledore pulled the third piece of parchment.

“The Hogwarts champion,” he called, “is Cedric Diggory!”

“No!” said Ron loudly, but nobody heard him except Harry; the uproar from the next table was too great. Every single Hufflepuff had jumped to his or her feet, screaming and stamping, as Cedric made his way past them, grinning broadly, and headed off toward the chamber behind the teachers’ table. Indeed, the applause for Cedric went on so long that it was some time before Dumbledore could make himself heard again.

“Excellent!” Dumbledore called happily as at last the tumult died down. “Well, we now have our three champions. I am sure I can count upon all of you, including the remaining students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, to give your champions every ounce of

support you can muster. By cheering your champion on, you will contribute in a very real —”

But Dumbledore suddenly stopped speaking, and it was apparent to everybody what had distracted him.

The fire in the goblet had just turned red again. Sparks were flying out of it. A long flame shot suddenly into the air, and borne upon it was another piece of parchment.

Automatically, it seemed, Dumbledore reached out a long hand and seized the parchment. He held it out and stared at the name written upon it. There was a long pause, during which Dumbledore stared at the slip in his hands, and everyone in the room stared at Dumbledore. And then Dumbledore cleared his throat and read out —

“Harry Potter.”

Die Beker Vol Vuur

"Ek glo dit nie!" sê Ron in 'n verbysterde stem toe die Hogwarts-studente die Durmstrang-geselskap by die trappe op volg. "Krum, Harry! Viktor Krum!"

"Genadetjie tog, Ron, hy's net 'n Kwiddiekspeler," sê Hermien.

"Net 'n Kwiddiekspeler?" sê Ron terwyl hy na haar kyk asof hy sy ore nie kan glo nie. "Hermien – hy's een van die beste Soekers in die wêreld! Ek het nie geweet hy's nog op skool nie!"

Terwyl hulle saam met die res van die Hogwarts-studente deur die Ingangsportaal na die Groot Saal stap, sien Harry hoe Lee Jordaan op die balle van sy voete op en af spring om Krum se agterkop beter te kan sien. Verskeie sesdejaarmeisies grawe angstig in hul sakke rond – "O nee, ek glo dit nie, ek het nie 'n enkele veerpen by my nie –" "Dink julle hy sal met lipstiffie op my hoed teken?"

"Regtig," sê Hermien uit die hoogte toe sy verby die meisies stap wat nou oor die lipstiffie stry.

"Ek gaan sy handtekening kry as ek kan," sê Ron. "Jy't nie dalk 'n veerpen by jou nie, Harry?"

"Û-û, dis bo in my tas," sê Harry.

Hulle stap na die Griffindortafel en gaan sit. Ron maak seker dat hy so sit dat hy die ingang kan sien waar Krum en sy Durmstrang-medestudente nog steeds rondstaan, oënskynlik onseker oor waar hulle moet sit. Die Beauxbatons-studente het by Raweklou se tafel gaan sit. Hulle kyk met somber uitdrukkings op hul gesigte in die Groot Saal rond. Drie van hulle hou nog steeds serpe en sjaals om hul koppe vas.

"Dis nie so koud nie," sê Hermien, wat hulle dophou, geïrriteerd. "Hoekom het hulle nie mantels gebring nie?"

"Hier! Kom sit hier!" sis Ron. "Hierso! Hermien, skuif op, maak plek –"

"Wat?"

"Te laat," sê Ron bitter.

Viktor Krum en sy Durmstrang-medestudente maak hulself reeds by die Slibberintafel tuis. Harry kan sien dat Malfoy, Krabbe en Goliat baie selfvoldaan lyk. Hy sien hoe Malfoy oorbuig om met Krum te praat.

“Ja, ja, kruip by hom in, Malfoy,” sê Ron snydend. “Ek wed Krum kan dwarsdeur hom sien . . . wed mense soek gedurig witvoetjie by hom . . . waar dink julle gaan hulle slaap? Ons kan vir hulle in ons slaapsaal plek maak, Harry . . . ek sal nie omgee as hy my bed vat nie, ek kan op ’n kampbed slaap.”

Hermien snork.

“Hulle lyk stukke gawer as die spul van Beauxbatons,” sê Harry.

Die Durmstrang-studente trek hul swaar pelse uit en kyk belangstellend op na die swart plafon oortrek met sterre; ’n paar van hulle tel die goue borde en bekere op om beter daarna te kan kyk en lyk beïndruk.

Fillis is besig om ekstra stoele na die personeeltafel te dra. Hy dra sy muwwerige ou swaelstertjas ter ere van die okkasie. Harry is verbaas om te sien dat hy vier ekstra stoele bysit, twee aan elke kant van Dompeldorius.

“Maar daar is net twee ekstra mense,” sê Harry. “Hoekom sit Fillis vier stoele by? Wie kom nog almal?”

“Hè?” sê Ron vaagweg. Hy staar nog steeds in vervoering na Krum.

Toe al die studente in die saal is en by hul huistafels gaan sit het, kom die personeel in, stap na die boonste tafel en neem hul plekke in. Heel laaste kom professor Dompeldorius, professor Karkaroff en Madame Maxine. Toe hul skoolhoof binnekom, spring die Beauxbatons-studente op. ’n Paar van die Hogwarts-studente lag. Die Beauxbatons-geselskap lyk egter nie in die minste verleë nie en gaan eers weer sit toe Madame Maxine haar plek aan Dompeldorius se linkerkant ingeneem het. Dompeldorius bly egter staan en ’n stilte daal oor die Groot Saal neer.

“Goeienaand, dames en here, spoke en – in die besonder – gaste,” sê Dompeldorius stralend aan die buitelandse besoekers. “Dit is vir my ’n groot vreugde om julle hier by Hogwarts te verwelkom. Ek hoop en vertrou dat jul besoek sowel aangenaam as genotvol sal wees.”

Een van die Beauxbatons-meisies wat nog steeds ’n serp om haar kop vashou, bars uit in ’n onmiskienbaar honende lag.

“Niemand dwing jou om hier te bly nie!” fluister Hermien omgekrap.

“Die Toernooi sal amptelik aan die einde van die fees geopen word,” sê Dompeldorius. “Ek nooi julle nou uit om te eet, te drink en julsself tuis te maak!”

Hy gaan sit en Harry sien dat Karkaroff weer dadelik oorleun om met hom te praat.

Die skottels voor hulle vul soos gewoonlik met kos. Die huiselwe in die kombuis doen duidelik hul uiterste bes; daar is ’n groter verskeidenheid disse voor hulle as wat Harry nog ooit gesien het, insluitend geregte wat beslis vreemd is.

“Wat’s *dit*?” vra Ron en wys na ’n groot skottel met ’n soort skulpvis-stowegereg wat langs ’n yslike bief-en-niertjie-pastei staan.

“Bouillabaisse,” sê Hermien.

“En vir jou ook!” sê Ron.

“Dis *Frans*,” sê Hermien. “Ek het dit geëet toe ons met vakansie was laat somer, dis baie lekker.”

“Ek glo jou,” sê Ron terwyl hy homself aan ’n stuk bloedwors help.

Om die een of ander rede voel dit asof die Groot Saal baie voller as gewoonlik is, hoewel daar skaars twintig ekstra studente is; dalk is dit omdat hul anderskleurige uniforms so helder teen Hogwarts se swart klere uitstaan. Noudat hulle hul pelse uitgetrek het, kan almal sien dat die Durmstrang-studente se klere bloedrooi is.

Sowat twintig minute nadat die fees begin het, kom Hagrid die Saal by ’n deur agter die personeeltafel in. Hy glip in sy stoel aan die punt van die tafel en waai vir Harry, Ron en Hermien met ’n hand wat in swaar verbande toegewikkel is.

“Gaan dit goed met die Krewels, Hagrid?” roep Harry.

“Hulle gedy!” roep Hagrid tevrede terug.

“Ja, ek wed dis net wat hulle doen,” sê Ron gedemp. “Lyk asof hulle uiteindelik kos gevind het waarvan hulle hou. Hagrid se vingers.”

Op daardie oomblik sê ’n stem, “Verskoon my, wil julle bouillabaisse hê?”

Dit is die Beauxbatons-meisie wat tydens Dompeldorius se toespraak gelag het. Sy het haar serp uiteindelik afgehaal. ’n Lang gerf silwerblonde hare hang tot amper by haar middel. Sy het groot diepblou oë en baie wit egalige tande.

Ron word pers. Hy staar na haar, maak sy mond oop om te antwoord, maar kry net ’n sagte gorrelgeluid uit.

“Jy kan dit maar kry,” sê Harry terwyl hy die skottel na haar toe stoot.

“Julle is klaar daarmee?”

“H’m,” sê Ron asemloos. “Ja, dit is uitstekend.”

Die meisie tel die skottel op en dra dit versigtig na die Rawekloutafel toe. Ron gaap haar nog steeds aan asof hy nog nooit tevore ’n meisie gesien het nie. Harry gaan aan die lag. Dis of die geluid Ron tot sy sinne bring.

“Sy’s ’n *Veela*!” sê hy skor vir Harry.

“Natuurlik is sy nie!” sê Hermien skerp. “Ek sien niemand anders wat haar soos ’n swaap aangaap nie!”

Sy is egter nie heeltemal reg nie. Toe die meisie deur die saal stap, draai baie seuns se koppe en dit lyk of ’n hele paar van hulle net soos Ron tydelik sprakeloos is.

“Ek sê julle, dis nie ’n normale meisiemens nie!” sê Ron wat na die kant toe leun om haar in die oog te kan hou. “Hulle maak hulle nie so by Hogwarts nie!”

“Hogwarts s’n is heeltemal oukei,” sê Harry sonder om te dink. Cho

Chang sit toevallig net 'n paar plekke van die meisie met die silwer hare af.

“Wanneer julle twee se oë uiteindelik weer in hul kasse is,” sê Hermien kortaf, “sal julle sien wie nou net opgedaag het.”

Sy wys na die personeeltafel. Die twee oorblywende stoele is so pas gevul. Ludo Bagman sit aan die ander kant van professor Karkaroff terwyl mnr. Crouch, Percy se baas, langs Madame Maxine sit.

“Wat maak hulle hier?” vra Harry verbaas.

“Hulle het mos die Drietowenaarstoernooi gereël, dan nie?” sê Hermien. “Hulle wil seker hier wees om die begin te sien.”

Toe die tweede gang opdaag, sien hulle 'n hele paar vreemde poedings. Ron bekyk 'n snaakse soort bleek blancmange van naderby en stoot dit dan versigtig 'n entjie na regs van waar dit duidelik vanaf die Rawekloutafel gesien kan word. Die meisie wat soos 'n Veela lyk, het egter skynbaar genoeg geëet en kom dit nie haal nie.

Sodra die goue borde skoon gegee is, staan Dompeldorius weer op. Nou vul 'n aangename soort spanning die saal. Harry voel 'n effense trilling van opwinding terwyl hy wonder wat nou gaan kom. Fred en George, wat 'n paar sitplekke van hulle af sit, leun vol afwagting vooroor en staar met die grootste konsentrasie na Dompeldorius.

“Die oomblik het aangebreek,” sê Dompeldorius glimlaggend vir die see van gesigte voor hom. “Die Drietowenaarstoernooi gaan nou begin. Ek moet egter net eers 'n paar woorde ter verduideliking sê voor ons die kissie inbring –”

“Watse kissie?” mompel Harry.

Ron haal sy skouers op.

“– om die prosedure wat ons vanjaar sal volg, toe te lig. Eerstens moet ek egter die volgende persone voorstel ter wille van diegene onder julle wat hulle nie ken nie. Mnr. Bartemius Crouch, hoof van die Departement vir Magiese Samewerking” – daar is 'n verspreide en hoflike applous – “en mnr. Ludo Bagman, hoof van die Departement vir Magiese Sport en Ontspanning.”

Die applous vir Bagman is aansienlik harder as vir Crouch, waarskynlik oor sy roem as Breker of dalk bloot omdat hy soveel gawer lyk. Hy ontvang dit met 'n joviale wuif van sy hand. Bartemius Crouch het nie geglimlag of gewuif toe sy naam genoem is nie. Harry onthou hom in sy netjiese pak by die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker en dink dat hy snaaks lyk in sy towenaarskleed. Sy tandeborselsnorretjie en reguit middelpaadjie lyk baie vreemd langs Dompeldorius se lang wit hare en baard.

“Mnre. Bagman en Crouch het oor die laaste paar maande onvermoeid aan die reëlins vir die Drietowenaarstoernooi gewerk,” gaan Dompeldorius voort, “en hulle sal saam met myself, professor Karkaroff en Madame Maxine op die paneel dien wat die kampioene se pogings sal beoordeel.”

By die aanhoor van die woord “kampioene” flikker al die studente se aandag skielik op.

Dalk het Dompeldorius hierdie skielike stilte gemerk, want hy glimlag toe hy sê, “Die kisse, asseblief, mnr. Fillis.”

Fillis, wat ongesiens in ’n hoek van die saal verskuil gestaan het, stap nou na Dompeldorius toe met ’n groot houtkis wat met juwele beslaan is in sy arms. Dit lyk of dit geweldig oud is. ’n Gebrom van opgewonde belangstelling styg op vanuit die geledere van die studente; Dennis Creevey staan glad op sy stoel om behoorlik te kan sien, maar omdat hy so klein is, steek sy kop skaars bo die ander mense s’n uit.

“Die aanwysings vir die take wat die kampioene vanjaar sal moet onderneem, is reeds deur mnr. Crouch en mnr. Bagman bestudeer,” sê Dompeldorius toe Fillis die kis versigtig op die tafel voor hom neersit, “en hulle het ook al die nodige reëlins vir elke taak getref. Daar is drie take wat oor die skooljaar sal plaasvind en wat die kampioene op verskillende maniere sal toets . . . hul towervvaardighede – hul durf – hul vermoë om afleidings te maak – en, natuurlik, hul vermoë om gevaar te hanteer.”

Met hierdie laaste woorde word die saal so stil dat dit voel asof niemand eens asemhaal nie.

“Soos julle weet, sal drie kampioene aan die Toernooi deelneem,” gaan Dompeldorius bedaard voort, “een uit elk van die deelnemende skole. Hulle sal punte ontvang vir hoe goed hulle elke Toernooitaak voltooi en die kampioen wat na die derde taak die hoogste totaal het, sal die Drietowenaarstroeë wen. Die kampioene sal deur ’n onpartydige keurder aangewys word . . . die Beker vol Vuur.”

Nou haal Dompeldorius sy towerstaf uit en tik drie maal teen die bokant van die kis. Die deksel kraak stadig oop. Dompeldorius steek sy hand in en haal ’n groot, grofgesnede houtbeker uit. Dit sou heeltemal onmerkwaardig gewees het as dit nie tot aan die rand vol dansende witblou vlamme was nie.

Dompeldorius maak die kis toe en sit die Beker versigtig daarop neer sodat almal in die Groot Saal dit duidelik kan sien.

“Enigeen wat hulself as kampioen wil nomineer, moet hul naam en skool duidelik op ’n stuk perkament skryf en in die Beker gooi,” sê Dompeldorius. “Voornemende kampioene het vier-en-twintig uur waartydens hulle hul name kan ingee. Môreand, op Allerheiligeand, sal die Beker die name van dié drie wat hy die waardigste ag, aan ons meedeel. Die Beker sal vanaand in die Ingangsportaal geplaas word waar almal wat wil deelneem vryelike toegang daartoe sal hê.

“Om te verseker dat studente wat te jonk is nie voor die versoeking swig nie,” sê Dompeldorius, “sal ek ’n Ouderdomslyn om die Beker Vol Vuur trek sodra dit in die Ingangsportaal is. Niemand jonger as sewentien sal oor daardie lyn kan tree nie.

“Laastens moet ek almal wat aan die Toernooi wil deelneem, waarsku dat deelname nie ligtelik onderneem moet word nie. Wanneer ’n kampioen deur die Beker Vol Vuur aangewys is, sal hy of sy verplig wees om enduit aan die Toernooi deel te neem. Sodra jou naam in die Beker Vol Vuur geplaas is, ontstaan ’n bindende towerkontrak. As jy eers as kampioen aangewys is, kan jy nie meer kop uittrek nie. Wees dus asseblief doodseker dat jy voluit daarvoor wil gaan voor jy jou naam in die Beker gooi. Wel, ek dink dis slaapyd. Goeienag, almal.”

“’n Ouderdomslyn!” sê Fred Weasley en sy oë skitter toe hulle oor die Saal na die deure van die Ingangsportaal stap. “Wel, ’n Verouderingspaljas behoort die jop te doen, of hoe? En as jou naam eers in daardie Beker is, dan lag jy al die pad – die ding kan tog nie sê of jy al sewentien is of nie!”

“Ek dink nie enigeen onder sewentien het ’n kans nie,” sê Hermien, “ons het nog nie genoeg geleer . . .”

“Sê jy,” sê George kortaf. “Jy gaan probeer, nè, Harry?”

Harry dink vir ’n oomblik aan hoe Dompeldorius daarop klem gelê het dat niemand onder sewentien hul name moet ingee nie, maar dan sien hy weer die wonderlike gesig van hoe hy die Drietowenaarstroeë wen . . . hy wonder presies *hoe* kwaad Dompeldorius sal wees as iemand wat jonger as sewentien is *wel* ’n manier vind om die Ouderdomslyn te fnuik . . .

“Waar is hy?” sê Ron wat nie na ’n woord luister nie, maar oor die skare tuur om te sien wat van Krum geword het. “Dompeldorius het nie gesê waar die Durmstrang-mense gaan slaap nie, het hy?”

Hierdie vraag word feitlik onmiddellik beantwoord; hulle is nou oorkant die Slibberintafel en Karkaroff het hom so pas na sy studente gehaas.

“Terug skip toe,” sê hy. “Viktor, hoe voel jy? Het jy genoeg gehad om te eet? Sal ek die kombuis vir ’n bietjie warm gekruide wyn vra?”

Harry sien hoe Krum sy kop skud terwyl hy sy pelsjas aantrek.

“Professor, *ek* sal van ’n bietjie wyn hou,” sê een van die ander Durmstrang-seuns hoopvol.

“Ek het nie met jou gepraat nie, Poliakoff,” jak Karkaroff hom af en sy warm vaderlike houding verdwyn eensklaps. “Ek sien jy het al weer kos voor op jou kleed gemors, slordige kind –”

Karkaroff draai om en lei die studente na die deure om dit op presies dieselfde oomblik as Harry, Ron en Hermien te bereik. Harry gaan staan sodat hulle eerste kan uitstap.

“Dankie,” sê Karkaroff ongeërg en kyk vlugtig na hom.

Dan steek Karkaroff vas. Weer draai sy kop na Harry en hy staar na hom asof hy sy oë nie kan glo nie. Die studente agter die skoolhoof kom ook tot stilstand. Karkaroff se oë dwaal stadig oor Harry se gesig tot dit op die litteken tot rus kom. Ook die Durmstrang-studente gaap Harry nuuskierig aan. Uit die hoek van sy oog sien Harry hoe begrip stadig op ’n paar

gesigte begin daal. Die seun wat die kos voor op sy kleed gemors het, stamp teen die meisie langs hom en wys openlik na Harry se voorkop.

“Ja, dis Harry Potter,” sê ’n skor stem agter hulle.

Professor Karkaroff swaai om. Dis Maloog Moodie. Hy leun swaar op sy staf en sy magiese oog staar strak na Durmstrang se skoolhoof.

Voor Harry se oë verlaat die kleur Karkaroff se gesig. ’n Aaklige uitdrukking van vrees gemeng met woede sprei oor sy gesig.

“Jy!” sê hy terwyl hy na Moodie staar asof hy onseker is dat dit regtig hy is.

“Ek,” sê Moodie grimmig, “en tensy jy iets anders vir Potter wil sê, Karkaroff, kan jy gerus aanstap. Julle staan die hele ingang vol.”

Dit is waar; die helfte van die studente in die Saal wag nou agter hulle en loer oor mekaar se skouers om te sien wat die rede vir die oponthoud is.

Sonder ’n verdere woord sleep professor Karkaroff sy studente saam met hom weg. Moodie kyk hulle agterna tot hulle buite sig is. Sy magiese oog is op Karkaroff se rug gerig en daar is ’n uitdrukking van intense haat op sy geskende gesig.

Die volgende dag is ’n Saterdag en gewoonlik gaan die meeste studente laat ontbyt eet. Harry, Ron en Hermien is egter nie die enigstes wat baie vroeër as normaalweg oor naweke op is nie. Toe hulle in die Ingangsportaal kom, sien hulle omtrent twintig studente wat daar rond dwaal. Party eet roosterbrood, maar almal bekijk die Beker Vol Vuur. Dit is in die middel van die portaal op die stoeltjie waarop die Sorteelhoed gewoonlik staan. ’n Dun goue sirkel is sowat drie meter van die stoel af op die vloer getrek.

“Het enigiemand al hul name ingegooi?” vra Ron gretig vir ’n derdejaarmeisie.

“Almal van Durmstrang het al,” antwoord sy, “maar ek het nog niemand van Hogwarts gesien nie.”

“Ek wed party het dit laas nag gedoen toe ons almal bed toe is,” sê Harry. “Ek sou as dit ek was . . . sal nie daarvan hou as almal kyk hoe ek dit doen nie. Wat as die Beker jou naam net daar weer uitspoeg?”

Agter Harry lag iemand. Toe hy omdraai, sien hy vir Fred, George en Lee Jordaan wat hulle met die trappe ondertoe haas terwyl al drie van hulle baie opgewonde lyk.

“Het dit gedoen,” sê Fred in ’n triomfantlike fluisterstem aan Harry, Ron en Hermien. “Het dit nou net gedrink.”

“Wat?” sê Ron.

“Verouderingspaljas, aap,” sê Fred.

“Een druppel elk,” sê George en hy vryf sy hande tevrede teen mekaar. “Ons hoef net ’n paar maande ouer te wees.”

“Ons gaan die duisend Galjoene tussen die drie van ons verdeel as een van ons wen,” sê Lee met ’n breë glimlag.

“Ek dink nie dit gaan werk nie, weet julle,” sê Hermien waarskuwend. “Ek is seker Dompeldorius sou hieraan gedink het.”

Fred, George en Lee ignoreer haar.

“Gereed?” sê Fred bewend van opgewondenheid aan die ander twee. “Komaan – ek gaan eerste –”

Harry kyk gefassineer toe terwyl Fred ’n stuk perkament met die woorde “Fred Weasley – Hogwarts” uit sy sak haal. Fred stap na die kant van die lyn en gaan staan en wieg op sy tone soos ’n swemmer wat regmaak om twintig meter ver te duik. Toe, voor die oë van elke persoon in die Ingangsportaal, trek hy sy asem diep in en tree oor die lyn.

Vir ’n breukdeel van ’n sekonde lyk dit vir Harry asof dit gewerk het – George dink duidelik ook so, want hy los ’n triomfantlike kreet en spring agterna – maar die volgende oomblik word die tweeling met ’n sissgeluid uit die goue kring geslinger asof ’n onsigbare gewigstoter hulle uitgegooi het. Hulle land pynlik hard drie meter verder op die koue klipvloer en skande by skade gevoeg, klink ’n harde plofgeluid boonop op en identiese lang wit baarde groei uit albei van hulle se kenne.

Die Ingangsportaal weergalm soos almal lag. Tot Fred en George lag saam – toe hulle eers weer opgestaan en mekaar se baarde bekijk het.

“Ek het julle gewaarsku,” sê ’n diep en geamuseerde stem en toe almal omswaai, sien hulle hoe professor Dompeldorius by die Groot Saal uitkom. Hy bestudeer vir Fred en George met vonkelende oë. “Ek stel voor dat julle na Madame Pomfrey gaan. Sy is reeds besig met mej. Fawcett van Raweklou en mnr. Summers van Hoesenproes wat ook albei besluit het om hulself ’n bietjie te verouder. Ek moet egter erken dat nie een van hulle se baarde heeltemal so besonders soos julle s’n is nie.”

Fred en George sit af siekeboeg toe, vergesel van Lee wat skreeu van die lag, terwyl Harry, Ron en Hermien giggelend ingaan vir ontbyt.

Die versierings in die Groot Saal lyk vanoggend heeltemal anders as gewoonlik. Omdat dit Allerheiligedag is, fladder ’n wolk lewende vlermuise teen die betowerde plafon rond terwyl honderde gekerfde pampoene uit al die hoeke na hulle gluur. Harry loop voor tot by Dean en Septimus wat besig is om dié Hogwarts-studente wat ouer as sewentien is en dalk sal inskryf, te bespreek.

“Die mense sê dat Warrington vroeg op is om sy naam te kom insit,” sê Dean vir Harry. “Hy’s daardie groot ou van Slibberin wat soos ’n luiaard lyk.”

Harry, wat al teen Warrington Kwiddiek gespeel het, skud sy kop met walging. “Ons kan nie ’n Slibberin-kampioen wil hê nie!”

“En al die Hoesenproesers praat van Diggory,” sê Septimus minagtend, “maar ek is seker hy sal nie sy mooi gesiggie wil waag nie.”

“Luister!” sê Hermien skielik.

Vanuit die Ingangsportaal gaan 'n gejuig onder die mense op. Hulle draai in hul stoele om en sien hoe Angelina Johnson die Saal met 'n verleë glimlag binnekom. Sy is 'n lang swart meisie wat vir Griffindor se Kwiddiekspeel Jaer speel. Sy stap tot by hulle, gaan sit en sê, "Wel, ek het dit gedoen! My naam nou net ingesit!"

"Jy maak 'n grap!" sê Ron, maar hy lyk beïndruk.

"Is jy dan al sewentien?" vra Harry.

"Natuurlik is sy. Sien jy miskien 'n baard?" sê Ron.

"Ek het verlede week verjaard," sê Angelina.

"Wel, ek is bly dat iemand van Griffindor ingeskryf het," sê Hermien.

"Ek hou duim vas dat dit jy is, Angelina!"

"Dankie, Hermien," sê Angelina met 'n glimlag.

"Ja, eerder jy as Mooiseun Diggory," sê Septimus sodat verskeie lede van Hoesenproes wat verby hul tafel stap vir hom skewebek trek.

"Wat gaan ons vandag alles doen?" vra Ron vir Harry en Hermien toe hulle klaar is met ontbyt en by die Groot Saal uitstap.

"Ons het nog nie vir Hagrid gaan kuier nie," sê Harry.

"Oukei," sê Ron, "solank hy net nie wil hê dat ons 'n paar vingers aan die Krewels moet skenk nie."

'n Uitdrukking van groot opgewondenheid sprei skielik oor Hermien se gesig.

"Ek dink nou net daaraan – ek het nog nie vir Hagrid gevra om by S.P.O.E.G. aan te sluit nie!" sê sy opgewonde. "Wag vir my, sal julle? Ek gaan net gou boontoe om die knopies te kry!"

"Ai tog," sê Ron ergerlik toe Hermien met die marmertappe boontoe hardloop.

"Haai, Ron," sê Harry skielik. "Daar's jou vriendin . . ."

Die Beauxbatons-studente kom deur die voordeure van buite in en die Veela-meisie is onder hulle. Die mense wat om die Beker Vol Vuur saamdrom, staan vol afgagting terug sodat hulle kan verbykom.

Madame Maxine volg haar studente tot in die portaal waar sy hulle in 'n ry laat staan. Die Beauxbatons-studente tree een vir een oor die Ouderdomslyn en laat val hul stukkies perkament in die blouwit vlamme. Met elke naam wat in die vuur val, word die vlamme vir 'n oomblik rooi en skiet vonke uit.

"Wat dink jy gaan met die ouens gebeur wat nie gekies is nie?" mompel Ron vir Harry toe die Veela-meisie haar perkament in die Beker Vol Vuur laat val. "Dink jy hulle sal moet teruggaan skool toe of sal hulle hier rondhang om die Toernooi te volg?"

"Weet nie," sê Harry. "Seker rondhang, dink ek . . . Madame Maxine is mos een van die beoordelaars, nie waar nie?"

Toe al die Beauxbatons-studente hul name ingegee het, lei Madame Maxine hulle weer by die portaal uit terug buitentoe.

“Waar slaap hulle?” vra Ron terwyl hy na die voordeur gaan om hulle agterna te kyk.

’n Harde ratelende geluid agter hulle kondig Hermien se aankoms met haar doos vol S.P.O.E.G.-knopies aan.

“A, goed, opskud,” sê Ron toe hy met die kliptrappe afspring, sy oë nog steeds op die rug van die Veela-meisie wat reeds tot die middel van die grasperk saam met Madame Maxine gevorder het.

Toe hulle by Hagrid se hut aan die rand van die Verbode Woud kom word die geheim van Beauxbatons se slaapkwartiere opgelos. Die reusagtige poeierblou koets waarin hulle gekom het, staan sowat tweehonderd meter van Hagrid se voordeur af en die studente is besig om daarin te klim. Die olifantagtige vlieënde perde wat die koets getrek het, staan langsaan in ’n tydelike kamp en wei.

Harry klop aan Hagrid se deur en Tande se dawerende geblaf klink onmiddellik op.

“Omtrent tyd ook,” sê Hagrid toe hy die deur oopgooi en sien wie geklop het. “Dag julle klomp het vergeet waar ek woon!”

“Ons was regtig besig, Ha—” begin Hermien, maar sy bly eensklaps stil terwyl sy lyk of woorde haar ontbreek en na Hagrid staar.

Hagrid dra sy beste (en werklik aaklige) harige bruin pak met ’n geruite geel-en-oranje das. Dit is nog nie die ergste nie; dit lyk of hy sy hare met groot hoeveelhede van iets wat soos ghries lyk, probeer tem het. Dit is platgetrek in twee bosse – dalk wou hy ’n poniestert soos Bill s’n maak, net om uit te vind dat hy te veel hare het. Hierdie voorkoms pas Hagrid hoegenaamd nie. Vir ’n oomblik gaap Hermien hom aan, en dis duidelik dat sy besluit het om liever nie kommentaar te lewer nie toe sy sê, “H’m – waar is die Krewels?”

“Buite in die pampoenland,” sê Hagrid in sy skik. “Hulle is besig om massief groot te raak, is al ’n goeie meter lank. Al probleem is dat hulle mekaar begin doodmaak het.”

“O nee, regtig?” sê Hermien en sy kyk kwaai na Ron wat nog na Hagrid se eienaardige haarstyl staar en so pas sy mond oopgemaak het asof hy iets wil sê.

“H’m,” sê Hagrid terneergedruk. “Maar dis oukei, wat, ek hou hulle nou in aparte bokse aan. Het nog omtrent twintig oor.”

“Wel, dis ’n geluk,” sê Ron en Hagrid merk nie die sarkasme nie.

Hagrid se hut beslaan ’n enkele vertrek. In die een hoek staan ’n reusagtige bed met ’n lappiesdeken. ’n Soortgelyke tamaai houttafel en -stoele staan voor die vuur onder ’n groot hoeveelheid gerookte hamme en dooie voëls wat van die plafon hang. Terwyl Hagrid tee maak, gaan sit hulle by die tafel en is gou besig om die Drietowenaarstoernooi verder te bespreek. Dit lyk asof Hagrid net so opgewonde soos hulle is.

“Wag net,” sê hy grinnikend. “Wag net. Julle gaan goed sien wat julle

nooit tevore gesien het nie. Eerste taak . . . h'm, maar ek's nie veron-
derstel om te sê nie."

"Komaan, Hagrid!" moedig Harry, Ron en Hermien hom aan, maar hy
skud bloot sy kop en grinnik.

"Ek wil dit nie vir julle bederf nie," sê Hagrid. "Maar dit gaan iets ongeloofliks wees, dit sê ek vir julle. Daai kampioene gaan meer as genoeg
le om te doen. Het nooit gedink ek sal die dag belewe dat die Drieto-
wenaarstoernooi weer gehou word nie!"

Op die ou end nuttig hulle middagete saam met Hagrid, hoewel nie-
mand juis baie eet nie – Hagrid het iets gemaak wat hy 'n beesbredie
noem, maar toe Hermien 'n yslike klou uit hare lig, verloor sy, Harry en
Ron hul aptyt so ietwat. Hulle geniet dit egter om Hagrid te probeer uit-
lok om vir hulle te sê wat die take in die Toernooi gaan wees terwyl hulle
wonder wie van die ingeskrewenes waarskynlik as kampioene aangewys
gaan word en of Fred en George se baarde al verdwyn het.

Teen die laatmiddag sak 'n ligte bui reën uit; dit is heerlik om snoesig
voor die vuur te sit en luister hoe die reëndruppels teen die venster slaan
terwyl hulle kyk hoe Hagrid sy kouse stop en luister hoe hy met Hermien
oor die huiselwe stry. Hy het botweg geweier om by S.P.O.E.G. aan te
sluit toe sy die knopies vir hom gewys het.

"Jy sal hulle 'n onguns bewys, Hermien," sê hy ernstig terwyl hy 'n
stuk dik geel gare deur 'n massiewe beennaald ryg. "Dis in hul natuur om
mense op te pas, dis waarvan hulle hou, sien? Jy sal hulle baie ongeluk-
kig maak as jy hul werk wegvat en jy sal hulle beledig as jy probeer om
hulle te betaal."

"Maar Harry het vir Dobbi vrygestel en hy was ekstaties!" sê Hermien.
"En ons hoor hy vra nou 'n loon!"

"Ja, goed, jy kry rares in elke soort. Ek sê nie dat daar nie hier en daar
'n elf is wat sy vryheid sal vat nie, maar jy sal die meeste van hulle nooit
sover kry nie – nee, Hermien, ek gaan nie."

Hermien lyk bitterlik vererg toe sy haar doos vol knopies terug in haar
mantel se sak bondel.

Teen halfses begin dit donker word en Ron, Harry en Hermien besluit
dat dit tyd is om terug kasteel toe te gaan vir die Allerheiligefees en,
belangriker, die aankondiging van die skole se kampioene.

"Ek kom saam met julle," sê Hagrid terwyl hy sy stopwerk wegpak.
"Gee my net 'n minuut."

Hagrid staan op, stap na die laaikas langs sy bed en begin daarin krap
op soek na iets. Hulle slaan nie juis daarop ag nie, tot 'n werklik aaklige
reuk hulle tref.

Ron hoes en sê, "Hagrid, wat's dit?"

"H'm?" sê Hagrid toe hy met 'n yslike bottel in sy hand omdraai. "Hou
julle nie daarvan nie?"

“Is dit ’n naskeermiddel?” vra Hermien in ’n ietwat gesmoorde stem.

“H’m – net Eau-de-Cologne,” mompel Hagrid blosend. “Dalk is dit ’n bietjie baie,” sê hy dan skor. “Ek sal dit gou afwas, wag net . . .”

Hy strompel uit die hut en hulle sien hoe hy homself energiek in die watervaatjie buite die venster was.

“Eau-de-Cologne?” sê Hermien verbaas. “Hagrid?”

“En wat is dit met sy hare en daardie pak?” vra Harry in ’n gedempte stem.

“Kyk!” sê Ron skielik en wys na die venster.

Hagrid het so pas regop gekom en omgedraai. As hy tevore gebloos het, is dit niks teen wat hy nou doen nie. Harry, Ron en Hermien staan versigtig op sodat Hagrid hulle nie moet sien nie en gaan loer deur die venster, net betyds om te sien hoe Madame Maxine en die Beauxbatons-studente, wat duidelik op pad fees toe is, uit hul koets klim. Hulle kan nie hoor wat Hagrid sê nie, maar toe hy met Madame Maxine praat, is daar ’n uitdrukking van verrukking en vervoering op sy gesig wat Harry nog net een keer vantevore gesien het – toe hy na Norbert die babadrakie gekyk het.

“Hy gaan saam met haar kasteel toe!” sê Hermien verontwaardig. “Ek dag hy gaan vir ons wag!”

Sonder om selfs een keer oor sy skouer na die hut toe terug te kyk, stap Hagrid saam met Madame Maxine oor die terrein terwyl die Beauxbatons-studente moet uithaal om by hul enorme lang treë te hou.

“Hy is verlief op haar!” sê Ron ongelowig. “Wel, as hulle kinders moet hê, sal hulle ’n nuwe wêreldrekord opstel – ek wed hulle baba sal amper ’n ton weeg.”

Hulle laat hulself uit die hut en maak die deur agter hulle toe. Dit is verbasend donker buite. Hulle trek hul mantels styf om hulle vas en loop oor die steil grasperke boontoe.

“Oe, dis hulle, kyk!” fluister Hermien.

Die Durmstrang-geselskap is van die meer af op pad kasteel toe. Viktor Krum loop langs Karkaroff en die ander Durmstrang-studente kom streep-streep agterna. Ron hou Krum opgewonde dop, maar Krum kyk nie om toe hulle die voordeure ’n entjie voor Hermien, Ron en Harry bereik en instap nie.

Toe hulle in die kersverligte Groot Saal kom, is dit so te sê vol. Die Beker Vol Vuur is verskuif; dit staan nou voor Dompeldorius se leë stoel by die onderwysers se tafel. Dit lyk asof Fred en George – nou weer skoongeskeer – hul teleurstelling redelik goed verwerk het.

“Hoop dis Angelina,” sê Fred toe Harry, Ron en Hermien gaan sit.

“Ek ook!” sê Hermien uitasem. “Wel, ons sal gou genoeg weet!”

Dis asof die Allerheiligefees baie langer as gewoonlik duur. Dis dalk omdat dit hul tweede fees in twee dae is, maar Harry voel nie soos ge-

woonlik lus vir die oordadig bereide kos nie. Te oordeel na die uitgerekte nekke, die ongeduldige uitdrukkings op al die gesigte en die gevroetel en geopstanery om te sien of Dompeldorius al klaar geëet het, wil al die ander in die Saal ook net hê dat die borde skoongegee moet word sodat hulle kan hoor wie die kampioene is.

Uiteindelik is die goue borde weer net so vlekkeloos skoon soos voor die maal en die geraasvlak in die Saal styg skerp, net om feitlik dadelik weer te daal toe Dompeldorius opstaan. Professor Karkaroff en Madame Maxine wat aan weerskante van hom sit, lyk net so gespanne en vol afgagting soos al die ander mense. Ludo Bagman straal en knipoog vir verskeie studente. Mnr. Crouch, daarenteen, lyk heeltemal ongeïnteresseerd, selfs ietwat verveeld.

“Wel, die Beker is amper gereed om sy besluit te neem,” sê Dompeldorius. “Ek reken nog een minuut. Nou, sodra die kampioene se name aangekondig word, vra ek dat hulle vorentoe kom, verby die personeeltafel loop en na die volgende vertrek gaan –” hy wys na ’n deur agter die personeeltafel, “– waar hulle hul eerste opdragte sal kry.”

Hy haal sy towerstaf uit en swaai dit wyd. Al die kerse, buiten dié wat binne-in die gekerfde pampoene is, gaan dadelik dood sodat dit skielik halfskemer om hulle is. Die Beker Vol Vuur skyn nou helderder as enigiets anders in die Saal, die skitterende, helder blouwit vlamme maak hul oë amper seer. Almal kyk, almal wag . . . ’n paar mense loer aanhoudend na hul horlosies . . .

“Enige oomblik,” fluister Lee Jordaan so twee sitplekke van Harry af.

Dan word die vlamme binne-in die Beker skielik rooi. Vonke spat daaruit en die volgende oomblik skiet ’n vlammetong die lug in en ’n geskroeiende stukkie perkament fladder daaruit – die hele vertrek snak na asem.

Dompeldorius vang die stukkie perkament en hou dit ’n armlengte van hom af sodat hy dit in die lig van die vlamme, wat nou weer blouwit is, kan lees.

“Die kampioen vir Durmstrang,” lees hy in ’n helder, sterk stem, “is Viktor Krum.”

“Dis nie juis ’n verrassing nie!” gil Ron toe ’n wilde gejuig in die Saal losbars. Harry sien hoe Viktor Krum van die Slibberintafel af opstaan en na Dompeldorius toe slof. Dan draai hy regs, stap verby die personeeltafel en verdwyn deur die ingang na die volgende vertrek.

“Bravo, Viktor!” bulder Karkaroff so hard dat almal hom selfs bo-oor die applous kan hoor. “Het geweet dit steek in jou!”

Die geklap en gebabbel sterf weg. Nou is almal se aandag weer op die Beker gevestig wat oomblikke later opnuut rooi word. ’n Tweede stukkie perkament skiet uit, aangevuur deur die vlamme.

“Die kampioen vir Beauxbatons,” sê Dompeldorius, “is Fleur Delacour!”

“Dis sy, Ron!” skree Harry toe die meisie wat so baie na ’n Veela lyk grasieus orent kom, haar lang, blonde hare terugskud en tussen Raweklou en Hoesenproes se tafels deurstap.

“Oe, kyk hoe teleurgesteld is hulle,” sê Hermien bo-oor die geraas en sy knik na die oorblywende lede van die Beauxbatons-geselskap. “Teleurgesteld” sê ver te min, dink Harry. Twee van die meisies wat nie gekies is nie, het in trane uitgebars en lê met hul koppe op hul arms en snik.

Nadat Fleur Delacour ook in die vertrek aan die agterkant verdwyn het, word alles weer stil, maar hierdie keer is die stilte so gespanne dat ’n mens dit amper kan voel. Hogwarts se kampioen is volgende . . .

Weer word die Beker Vol Vuur rooi; vonke spat daaruit; die vlamtong skiet hoog die lug in en Dompeldorius trek die derde stuk perkament uit die punt.

“Hogwarts se kampioen,” roep hy uit, “is Cedric Diggory!”

“Nee!” sê Ron hardop, maar niemand behalwe Harry hoor hom nie; die gejuig van die tafel langsaan is net te groot. Elke enkele Hoesenproeser kom skreeuend en voetestampend orent terwyl Cedric met ’n breë glimlag verby hulle na die vertrek agter die onderwysers se tafel stap. Die applous vir Cedric hou so lank aan dat dit ’n geruime tyd duur voor Dompeldorius homself hoorbaar kan maak.

“Uitstekend!” roep Dompeldorius in sy noppies uit toe die kabaal uiteindelik weggesteef het. “Wel, nou het ons ons drie kampioene. Ek is seker ek kan op almal van julle staatmaak, en dit sluit die oorblywende studente van Beauxbatons en Durmstrang in, om jul kampioene elke greintjie ondersteuning wat julle bymekaar kan skraap, te gee. Deur jul kampioene te ondersteun, sal julle ’n bydrae maak, op ’n ware –”

Toe Dompeldorius skielik stil word, is dit vir almal duidelik wat hom gesteur het.

Die vuur in die Beker het weer rooi geword. Vonke spat daaruit. ’n Lang vlam skiet die lug in en hulle sien nog ’n stuk perkament.

Dit lyk asof Dompeldorius sy hand half outomaties na die perkament toe uitsteek. Hy hou dit voor hom en staar na die naam wat daarop geskryf is. Daar heers ’n lang stilte waarin Dompeldorius bloot na die flenter perkament in sy hand staar terwyl almal in die vertrek op hul beurt na Dompeldorius staar. Toe maak Dompeldorius sy keel skoon en lees –

“Harry Potter.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



THE FOUR CHAMPIONS

Harry sat there, aware that every head in the Great Hall had turned to look at him. He was stunned. He felt numb. He was surely dreaming. He had not heard correctly.

There was no applause. A buzzing, as though of angry bees, was starting to fill the Hall; some students were standing up to get a better look at Harry as he sat, frozen, in his seat.

Up at the top table, Professor McGonagall had got to her feet and swept past Ludo Bagman and Professor Karkaroff to whisper urgently to Professor Dumbledore, who bent his ear toward her, frowning slightly.

Harry turned to Ron and Hermione; beyond them, he saw the long

Gryffindor table all watching him, openmouthed.

“I didn’t put my name in,” Harry said blankly. “You know I didn’t.”

Both of them stared just as blankly back.

At the top table, Professor Dumbledore had straightened up, nodding to Professor McGonagall.

“Harry Potter!” he called again. “Harry! Up here, if you please!”

“Go on,” Hermione whispered, giving Harry a slight push.

Harry got to his feet, trod on the hem of his robes, and stumbled slightly. He set off up the gap between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables. It felt like an immensely long walk; the top table didn’t seem to be getting any nearer at all, and he could feel hundreds and hundreds of eyes upon him, as though each were a searchlight. The buzzing grew louder and louder. After what seemed like an hour, he was right in front of Dumbledore, feeling the stares of all the teachers upon him.

“Well . . . through the door, Harry,” said Dumbledore. He wasn’t smiling.

Harry moved off along the teachers’ table. Hagrid was seated right at the end. He did not wink at Harry, or wave, or give any of his usual signs of greeting. He looked completely astonished and stared at Harry as he passed like everyone else. Harry went through the door out of the Great Hall and found himself in a smaller room, lined with paintings of witches and wizards. A handsome fire was roaring in the fireplace opposite him.

The faces in the portraits turned to look at him as he entered. He saw a wizened witch flit out of the frame of her picture and into the

one next to it, which contained a wizard with a walrus mustache. The wizened witch started whispering in his ear.

Viktor Krum, Cedric Diggory, and Fleur Delacour were grouped around the fire. They looked strangely impressive, silhouetted against the flames. Krum, hunched-up and brooding, was leaning against the mantelpiece, slightly apart from the other two. Cedric was standing with his hands behind his back, staring into the fire. Fleur Delacour looked around when Harry walked in and threw back her sheet of long, silvery hair.

“What is it?” she said. “Do zey want us back in ze Hall?”

She thought he had come to deliver a message. Harry didn’t know how to explain what had just happened. He just stood there, looking at the three champions. It struck him how very tall all of them were.

There was a sound of scurrying feet behind him, and Ludo Bagman entered the room. He took Harry by the arm and led him forward.

“Extraordinary!” he muttered, squeezing Harry’s arm. “Absolutely extraordinary! Gentlemen . . . lady,” he added, approaching the fireside and addressing the other three. “May I introduce — incredible though it may seem — the *fourth* Triwizard champion?”

Viktor Krum straightened up. His surly face darkened as he surveyed Harry. Cedric looked nonplussed. He looked from Bagman to Harry and back again as though sure he must have misheard what Bagman had said. Fleur Delacour, however, tossed her hair, smiling, and said, “Oh, vairy funny joke, Meester Bagman.”

“Joke?” Bagman repeated, bewildered. “No, no, not at all! Harry’s name just came out of the Goblet of Fire!”

Krum’s thick eyebrows contracted slightly. Cedric was still

looking politely bewildered. Fleur frowned.

“But evidently zair ’as been a mistake,” she said contemptuously to Bagman. “’E cannot compete. ’E is too young.”

“Well . . . it is amazing,” said Bagman, rubbing his smooth chin and smiling down at Harry. “But, as you know, the age restriction was only imposed this year as an extra safety measure. And as his name’s come out of the goblet . . . I mean, I don’t think there can be any ducking out at this stage. . . . It’s down in the rules, you’re obliged . . . Harry will just have to do the best he —”

The door behind them opened again, and a large group of people came in: Professor Dumbledore, followed closely by Mr. Crouch, Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Snape. Harry heard the buzzing of the hundreds of students on the other side of the wall, before Professor McGonagall closed the door.

“Madame Maxime!” said Fleur at once, striding over to her headmistress. “Zey are saying zat zis little boy is to compete also!”

Somewhere under Harry’s numb disbelief he felt a ripple of anger. *Little boy?*

Madame Maxime had drawn herself up to her full, and considerable, height. The top of her handsome head brushed the candle-filled chandelier, and her gigantic black-satin bosom swelled.

“What is ze meaning of zis, Dumbly-dorr?” she said imperiously.

“I’d rather like to know that myself, Dumbledore,” said Professor Karkaroff. He was wearing a steely smile, and his blue eyes were like chips of ice. “*Two* Hogwarts champions? I don’t remember anyone telling me the host school is allowed two champions — or

have I not read the rules carefully enough?"

He gave a short and nasty laugh.

"*C'est impossible*," said Madame Maxime, whose enormous hand with its many superb opals was resting upon Fleur's shoulder. "'Ogwarts cannot 'ave two champions. It is most injust."

"We were under the impression that your Age Line would keep out younger contestants, Dumbledore," said Karkaroff, his steely smile still in place, though his eyes were colder than ever. "Otherwise, we would, of course, have brought along a wider selection of candidates from our own schools."

"It's no one's fault but Potter's, Karkaroff," said Snape softly. His black eyes were alight with malice. "Don't go blaming Dumbledore for Potter's determination to break rules. He has been crossing lines ever since he arrived here —"

"Thank you, Severus," said Dumbledore firmly, and Snape went quiet, though his eyes still glinted malevolently through his curtain of greasy black hair.

Professor Dumbledore was now looking down at Harry, who looked right back at him, trying to discern the expression of the eyes behind the half-moon spectacles.

"Did you put your name into the Goblet of Fire, Harry?" he asked calmly.

"No," said Harry. He was very aware of everybody watching him closely. Snape made a soft noise of impatient disbelief in the shadows.

"Did you ask an older student to put it into the Goblet of Fire for you?" said Professor Dumbledore, ignoring Snape.

“No,” said Harry vehemently.

“Ah, but of course ’e is lying!” cried Madame Maxime. Snape was now shaking his head, his lip curling.

“He could not have crossed the Age Line,” said Professor McGonagall sharply. “I am sure we are all agreed on that —”

“Dumbly-dorr must ’ave made a mistake wiz ze line,” said Madame Maxime, shrugging.

“It is possible, of course,” said Dumbledore politely.

“Dumbledore, you know perfectly well you did not make a mistake!” said Professor McGonagall angrily. “Really, what nonsense! Harry could not have crossed the line himself, and as Professor Dumbledore believes that he did not persuade an older student to do it for him, I’m sure that should be good enough for everybody else!”

She shot a very angry look at Professor Snape.

“Mr. Crouch . . . Mr. Bagman,” said Karkaroff, his voice unctuous once more, “you are our — er — objective judges. Surely you will agree that this is most irregular?”

Bagman wiped his round, boyish face with his handkerchief and looked at Mr. Crouch, who was standing outside the circle of the firelight, his face half hidden in shadow. He looked slightly eerie, the half darkness making him look much older, giving him an almost skull-like appearance. When he spoke, however, it was in his usual curt voice.

“We must follow the rules, and the rules state clearly that those people whose names come out of the Goblet of Fire are bound to compete in the tournament.”

“Well, Barty knows the rule book back to front,” said Bagman, beaming and turning back to Karkaroff and Madame Maxime, as though the matter was now closed.

“I insist upon resubmitting the names of the rest of my students,” said Karkaroff. He had dropped his unctuous tone and his smile now. His face wore a very ugly look indeed. “You will set up the Goblet of Fire once more, and we will continue adding names until each school has two champions. It’s only fair, Dumbledore.”

“But Karkaroff, it doesn’t work like that,” said Bagman. “The Goblet of Fire’s just gone out — it won’t reignite until the start of the next tournament —”

“— in which Durmstrang will most certainly not be competing!” exploded Karkaroff. “After all our meetings and negotiations and compromises, I little expected something of this nature to occur! I have half a mind to leave now!”

“Empty threat, Karkaroff,” growled a voice from near the door. “You can’t leave your champion now. He’s got to compete. They’ve all got to compete. Binding magical contract, like Dumbledore said. Convenient, eh?”

Moody had just entered the room. He limped toward the fire, and with every right step he took, there was a loud *clunk*.

“Convenient?” said Karkaroff. “I’m afraid I don’t understand you, Moody.”

Harry could tell he was trying to sound disdainful, as though what Moody was saying was barely worth his notice, but his hands gave him away; they had balled themselves into fists.

“Don’t you?” said Moody quietly. “It’s very simple, Karkaroff.

Someone put Potter's name in that goblet knowing he'd have to compete if it came out."

"Evidently, someone 'oo wished to give 'Ogwarts two bites at ze apple!" said Madame Maxime.

"I quite agree, Madame Maxime," said Karkaroff, bowing to her. "I shall be lodging complaints with the Ministry of Magic *and* the International Confederation of Wizards —"

"If anyone's got reason to complain, it's Potter," growled Moody, "but . . . funny thing . . . I don't hear *him* saying a word. . . ."

"Why should 'e complain?" burst out Fleur Delacour, stamping her foot. "'E 'as ze chance to compete, 'asn't 'e? We 'ave all been 'oping to be chosen for weeks and weeks! Ze honor for our schools! A thousand Galleons in prize money — zis is a chance many would die for!"

"Maybe someone's hoping Potter *is* going to die for it," said Moody, with the merest trace of a growl.

An extremely tense silence followed these words. Ludo Bagman, who was looking very anxious indeed, bounced nervously up and down on his feet and said, "Moody, old man . . . what a thing to say!"

"We all know Professor Moody considers the morning wasted if he hasn't discovered six plots to murder him before lunchtime," said Karkaroff loudly. "Apparently he is now teaching his students to fear assassination too. An odd quality in a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Dumbledore, but no doubt you had your reasons."

"Imagining things, am I?" growled Moody. "Seeing things, eh? It was a skilled witch or wizard who put the boy's name in that goblet. . . ."

“Ah, what evidence is zere of zat?” said Madame Maxime, throwing up her huge hands.

“Because they hoodwinked a very powerful magical object!” said Moody. “It would have needed an exceptionally strong Confundus Charm to bamboozle that goblet into forgetting that only three schools compete in the tournament. . . . I’m guessing they submitted Potter’s name under a fourth school, to make sure he was the only one in his category. . . .”

“You seem to have given this a great deal of thought, Moody,” said Karkaroff coldly, “and a very ingenious theory it is — though of course, I heard you recently got it into your head that one of your birthday presents contained a cunningly disguised basilisk egg, and smashed it to pieces before realizing it was a carriage clock. So you’ll understand if we don’t take you entirely seriously. . . .”

“There are those who’ll turn innocent occasions to their advantage,” Moody retorted in a menacing voice. “It’s my job to think the way Dark wizards do, Karkaroff — as you ought to remember. . . .”

“Alastor!” said Dumbledore warningly. Harry wondered for a moment whom he was speaking to, but then realized “Mad-Eye” could hardly be Moody’s real first name. Moody fell silent, though still surveying Karkaroff with satisfaction — Karkaroff’s face was burning.

“How this situation arose, we do not know,” said Dumbledore, speaking to everyone gathered in the room. “It seems to me, however, that we have no choice but to accept it. Both Cedric and Harry have been chosen to compete in the tournament. This, therefore, they will

do. . . .”

“Ah, but Dumbly-dorr —”

“My dear Madame Maxime, if you have an alternative, I would be delighted to hear it.”

Dumbledore waited, but Madame Maxime did not speak, she merely glared. She wasn’t the only one either. Snape looked furious; Karkaroff livid; Bagman, however, looked rather excited.

“Well, shall we crack on, then?” he said, rubbing his hands together and smiling around the room. “Got to give our champions their instructions, haven’t we? Barty, want to do the honors?”

Mr. Crouch seemed to come out of a deep reverie.

“Yes,” he said, “instructions. Yes . . . the first task . . .”

He moved forward into the firelight. Close up, Harry thought he looked ill. There were dark shadows beneath his eyes and a thin, papery look about his wrinkled skin that had not been there at the Quidditch World Cup.

“The first task is designed to test your daring,” he told Harry, Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor, “so we are not going to be telling you what it is. Courage in the face of the unknown is an important quality in a wizard . . . very important. . . .

“The first task will take place on November the twenty-fourth, in front of the other students and the panel of judges.

“The champions are not permitted to ask for or accept help of any kind from their teachers to complete the tasks in the tournament. The champions will face the first challenge armed only with their wands. They will receive information about the second task when the first is over. Owing to the demanding and time-consuming nature of the

tournament, the champions are exempted from end-of-year tests.”

Mr. Crouch turned to look at Dumbledore.

“I think that’s all, is it, Albus?”

“I think so,” said Dumbledore, who was looking at Mr. Crouch with mild concern. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like to stay at Hogwarts tonight, Barty?”

“No, Dumbledore, I must get back to the Ministry,” said Mr. Crouch. “It is a very busy, very difficult time at the moment. . . . I’ve left young Weatherby in charge. . . . Very enthusiastic . . . a little overenthusiastic, if truth be told. . . .”

“You’ll come and have a drink before you go, at least?” said Dumbledore.

“Come on, Barty, I’m staying!” said Bagman brightly. “It’s all happening at Hogwarts now, you know, much more exciting here than at the office!”

“I think not, Ludo,” said Crouch with a touch of his old impatience.

“Professor Karkaroff — Madame Maxime — a nightcap?” said Dumbledore.

But Madame Maxime had already put her arm around Fleur’s shoulders and was leading her swiftly out of the room. Harry could hear them both talking very fast in French as they went off into the Great Hall. Karkaroff beckoned to Krum, and they, too, exited, though in silence.

“Harry, Cedric, I suggest you go up to bed,” said Dumbledore, smiling at both of them. “I am sure Gryffindor and Hufflepuff are waiting to celebrate with you, and it would be a shame to deprive them of this excellent excuse to make a great deal of mess and noise.”

Harry glanced at Cedric, who nodded, and they left together.

The Great Hall was deserted now; the candles had burned low, giving the jagged smiles of the pumpkins an eerie, flickering quality.

“So,” said Cedric, with a slight smile. “We’re playing against each other again!”

“I s’pose,” said Harry. He really couldn’t think of anything to say. The inside of his head seemed to be in complete disarray, as though his brain had been ransacked.

“So . . . tell me . . .” said Cedric as they reached the entrance hall, which was now lit only by torches in the absence of the Goblet of Fire. “How *did* you get your name in?”

“I didn’t,” said Harry, staring up at him. “I didn’t put it in. I was telling the truth.”

“Ah . . . okay,” said Cedric. Harry could tell Cedric didn’t believe him. “Well . . . see you, then.”

Instead of going up the marble staircase, Cedric headed for a door to its right. Harry stood listening to him going down the stone steps beyond it, then, slowly, he started to climb the marble ones.

Was anyone except Ron and Hermione going to believe him, or would they all think he’d put himself in for the tournament? Yet how could anyone think that, when he was facing competitors who’d had three years’ more magical education than he had — when he was now facing tasks that not only sounded very dangerous, but which were to be performed in front of hundreds of people? Yes, he’d thought about it . . . he’d fantasized about it . . . but it had been a joke, really, an idle sort of dream . . . he’d never really, *seriously* considered entering. . . .

But someone else had considered it . . . someone else had wanted him in the tournament, and had made sure he was entered. Why? To give him a treat? He didn't think so, somehow. . . .

To see him make a fool of himself? Well, they were likely to get their wish. . . .

But to get him *killed*?

Was Moody just being his usual paranoid self? Couldn't someone have put Harry's name in the goblet as a trick, a practical joke? Did anyone really want him dead?

Harry was able to answer that at once. Yes, someone wanted him dead, someone had wanted him dead ever since he had been a year old . . . Lord Voldemort. But how could Voldemort have ensured that Harry's name got into the Goblet of Fire? Voldemort was supposed to be far away, in some distant country, in hiding, alone . . . feeble and powerless. . . .

Yet in that dream he had had, just before he had awoken with his scar hurting, Voldemort had not been alone . . . he had been talking to Wormtail . . . plotting Harry's murder. . . .

Harry got a shock to find himself facing the Fat Lady already. He had barely noticed where his feet were carrying him. It was also a surprise to see that she was not alone in her frame. The wizened witch who had flitted into her neighbor's painting when he had joined the champions downstairs was now sitting smugly beside the Fat Lady. She must have dashed through every picture lining seven staircases to reach here before him. Both she and the Fat Lady were looking down at him with the keenest interest.

"Well, well, well," said the Fat Lady, "Violet's just told me

everything. Who's just been chosen as school champion, then?"

"Balderdash," said Harry dully.

"It most certainly isn't!" said the pale witch indignantly.

"No, no, Vi, it's the password," said the Fat Lady soothingly, and she swung forward on her hinges to let Harry into the common room.

The blast of noise that met Harry's ears when the portrait opened almost knocked him backward. Next thing he knew, he was being wrenched inside the common room by about a dozen pairs of hands, and was facing the whole of Gryffindor House, all of whom were screaming, applauding, and whistling.

"You should've told us you'd entered!" bellowed Fred; he looked half annoyed, half deeply impressed.

"How did you do it without getting a beard? Brilliant!" roared George.

"I didn't," Harry said. "I don't know how —"

But Angelina had now swooped down upon him; "Oh if it couldn't be me, at least it's a Gryffindor —"

"You'll be able to pay back Diggory for that last Quidditch match, Harry!" shrieked Katie Bell, another of the Gryffindor Chasers.

"We've got food, Harry, come and have some —"

"I'm not hungry, I had enough at the feast —"

But nobody wanted to hear that he wasn't hungry; nobody wanted to hear that he hadn't put his name in the goblet; not one single person seemed to have noticed that he wasn't at all in the mood to celebrate. . . . Lee Jordan had unearthed a Gryffindor banner from somewhere, and he insisted on draping it around Harry like a cloak. Harry couldn't get away; whenever he tried to sidle over to the

staircase up to the dormitories, the crowd around him closed ranks, forcing another butterbeer on him, stuffing crisps and peanuts into his hands. . . . Everyone wanted to know how he had done it, how he had tricked Dumbledore's Age Line and managed to get his name into the goblet. . . .

"I didn't," he said, over and over again, "I don't know how it happened."

But for all the notice anyone took, he might just as well not have answered at all.

"I'm tired!" he bellowed finally, after nearly half an hour. "No, seriously, George — I'm going to bed —"

He wanted more than anything to find Ron and Hermione, to find a bit of sanity, but neither of them seemed to be in the common room. Insisting that he needed to sleep, and almost flattening the little Creevey brothers as they attempted to waylay him at the foot of the stairs, Harry managed to shake everyone off and climb up to the dormitory as fast as he could.

To his great relief, he found Ron was lying on his bed in the otherwise empty dormitory, still fully dressed. He looked up when Harry slammed the door behind him.

"Where've you been?" Harry said.

"Oh hello," said Ron.

He was grinning, but it was a very odd, strained sort of grin. Harry suddenly became aware that he was still wearing the scarlet Gryffindor banner that Lee had tied around him. He hastened to take it off, but it was knotted very tightly. Ron lay on the bed without moving, watching Harry struggle to remove it.

“So,” he said, when Harry had finally removed the banner and thrown it into a corner. “Congratulations.”

“What d’you mean, congratulations?” said Harry, staring at Ron. There was definitely something wrong with the way Ron was smiling: It was more like a grimace.

“Well . . . no one else got across the Age Line,” said Ron. “Not even Fred and George. What did you use — the Invisibility Cloak?”

“The Invisibility Cloak wouldn’t have got me over that line,” said Harry slowly.

“Oh right,” said Ron. “I thought you might’ve told me if it was the Cloak . . . because it would’ve covered both of us, wouldn’t it? But you found another way, did you?”

“Listen,” said Harry, “I didn’t put my name in that goblet. Someone else must’ve done it.”

Ron raised his eyebrows.

“What would they do that for?”

“I dunno,” said Harry. He felt it would sound very melodramatic to say, “To kill me.”

Ron’s eyebrows rose so high that they were in danger of disappearing into his hair.

“It’s okay, you know, you can tell *me* the truth,” he said. “If you don’t want everyone else to know, fine, but I don’t know why you’re bothering to lie, you didn’t get into trouble for it, did you? That friend of the Fat Lady’s, that Violet, she’s already told us all Dumbledore’s letting you enter. A thousand Galleons prize money, eh? And you don’t have to do end-of-year tests either. . . .”

“I didn’t put my name in that goblet!” said Harry, starting to feel

angry.

“Yeah, okay,” said Ron, in exactly the same skeptical tone as Cedric. “Only you said this morning you’d have done it last night, and no one would’ve seen you. . . . I’m not stupid, you know.”

“You’re doing a really good impression of it,” Harry snapped.

“Yeah?” said Ron, and there was no trace of a grin, forced or otherwise, on his face now. “You want to get to bed, Harry. I expect you’ll need to be up early tomorrow for a photo-call or something.”

He wrenched the hangings shut around his four-poster, leaving Harry standing there by the door, staring at the dark red velvet curtains, now hiding one of the few people he had been sure would believe him.

Die Vier Kampioene

Soos Harry daar sit, is hy daarvan bewus dat elke kop in die Groot Saal na hom gedraai het. Hy is dronkgeslaan. Hy voel skoon lam. Dit moet 'n droom wees. Hy het nie reg gehoor nie.

Daar is geen toejuiging nie. 'n Gebrom soos van woedende bye begin om die Saal te vul; sommige studente staan op om Harry, wat bevrore in sy stoel sit, beter te kan sien.

By die hooftafel het professor McGonagall orent gekom en verby Ludo Bagman en professor Karkaroff gestryk om iets dringendes vir professor Dompeldorius te gaan fluister. Hy buig sy kop af na haar en frons effens.

Harry kyk na Ron en Hermien; anderkant hulle sien hy hoe almal wat aan die lang Griffindortafel sit hom oopmond aangaap.

“Ek het nie my naam ingesit nie,” sê Harry dofweg. “Julle weet tog ek het nie.”

Die twee van hulle staar net so verbluf na hom.

By die hooftafel het professor Dompeldorius weer orent gekom. Hy knik vir professor McGonagall.

“Harry Potter!” roep hy weer. “Harry! Kom hier, asseblief!”

“Gaan,” fluister Hermien en gee vir Harry 'n ligte stampie.

Harry staan op, trap op sy kleed se soom en struikel effens. Dan stap hy tussen die Griffindor- en Hoesenproestafels deur. Dit voel geweldig ver; die hooftafel wil net nie nader kom nie en hy voel honderde en honderde oë soos soekligte op hom. Die gebrom word harder en harder. Na wat soos 'n uur voel, is hy reg voor Dompeldorius en kan hy die oë van al die onderwysers op hom voel.

“Wel . . . deur die ingang, Harry,” sê Dompeldorius. Hy glimlag nie.

Harry stap verby die onderwysers se tafel. Hagrid sit heel aan die punt. Hy knipoog nie vir Harry nie, waai ook nie, gee nie een van sy gewone tekens van herkenning nie. Hy lyk heeltemal verbaas en net soos al die ander staar hy na Harry toe hy verbystap. Harry loop deur die ingang wat uit die Groot Saal lei en bevind hom in 'n kleiner vertrek met rye portrette van hekse en towenaars teen die mure. 'n Groot vuur brul in die vuurherd oorkant hom.

Toe hy instap, draai die gesigte in die portrette en kyk na hom. Hy sien hoe 'n verrimpelde heks uit haar portret se raam na die een langsaan glip, waarin 'n towenaar met 'n walrussnor sit. Die verrimpelde heks begin om iets in sy oor te fluister.

Viktor Krum, Cedric Diggory en Fleur Delacour staan in 'n kring om die vuur. Hulle lyk vreemd indrukwekkend, so afgeteken teen die vlamme. Krum staan, vooroorgebuig en peinsend, 'n entjie van die ander twee af en leun teen die kaggelrak. Cedric hou sy hande agter sy rug en staar in die vlamme. Fleur Delacour kyk om toe Harry inkom en gooi dan haar lang silwerblonde hare terug.

“Wat is dit?” sê sy. “Wil hulle ons terug in die Saal hê?”

Sy dink hy het 'n boodskap kom aflewer. Harry weet nie hoe om te verduidelik wat so pas gebeur het nie. Hy bly net daar staan en kyk na die drie kampioene. Dit tref hom meteens hoe lank hulle almal is.

Agter hulle klink die geluid van haastige voetstappe op en Ludo Bagman kom die vertrek binne. Hy neem Harry aan die arm en lei hom vorentoe.

“Uitsonderlik!” mompel hy terwyl hy Harry se arm druk. “Absoluut uitsonderlik! Dame . . . here,” voeg hy by terwyl hy na die vuurherd stap om die ander drie toe te spreek. “Mag ek julle voorstel – ongelooflik soos dit mag lyk – aan die vierde Drietowenaarskampioen!”

Viktor Krum kom regop. Sy stroewe gesig verdonker toe hy na Harry kyk. Cedric lyk uit die veld geslaan. Hy kyk van Bagman na Harry en weer terug asof hy seker is dat hy Bagman verkeerd verstaan het. Fleur Delacour gooi egter haar hare terug, glimlag en sê, “O, baie amusante grappie, mnr. Bagman.”

“Grappie?” herhaal Bagman verwilderd. “Nee, nee, glad nie! Harry se naam het so pas uit die Beker Vol Vuur gekom!”

Krum se swaar wenkbroue trek so effens saam. Cedric lyk nog steeds beleefd verwilderd.

Fleur frons. “Maar daar moet iewers 'n fout wees,” sê sy minagtend vir Bagman. “Hy kan nie deelneem nie. Hy is te jonk.”

“Wel . . . dit is verstommend,” sê Bagman terwyl hy sy gladde ken vryf en vir Harry glimlag. “Maar soos julle weet, is die ouderdomsbepkering vanjaar bloot as 'n ekstra veiligheidsmaatreël ingestel. En sy naam het uit die Beker gekom . . . ek bedoel, ek dink nie 'n mens kan in hierdie stadion uitdraai nie . . . dis in die reëls, jy is verplig . . . Harry sal net sy bes moet doen, hy –”

Die deur agter hulle het weer oopgegaan en 'n groot groep mense kom in: professor Dompeldorius is heel voor met mnr. Crouch, professor Karakoff, Madame Maxine, professor McGonagall en professor Snerp kort op sy hakke. Harry hoor die gegons van stemme van die honderde studente aan die ander kant van die muur voor professor McGonagall die deur kan toemaak.

“Madame Maxine!” sê Fleur dadelik en stap na haar skoolhoof. “Hulle se dat hierdie klein seuntjie ook gaan deelneem!”

lewers onder die lam gevoel van ongeloof voel Harry ’n rimpeling van woele. Klein seuntjie?

Madame Maxine strek haarself uit tot haar volle en aansienlike lengte. Die bokant van haar aantreklike kop raak-raak aan die kandelaar met kerse en haar swart reusesatynboesem swel uit.

“Wat is die betekenis hiervan, Dompelie-dorr?” sê sy gebiedend.

“Ek sal self graag wil weet, Dompeldorius,” sê professor Karkaroff. ’n Staalharde glimlaggie speel om sy lippe en sy blou oë lyk soos skerfies ys. “Twee Hogwartskampioene? Ek kan nie onthou dat iemand vir my gesê het dat die gashere twee kampioene mag hê nie – of het ek die reëls nie behoorlik gelees nie?”

Hy uiter ’n kort en onaangename laggie.

“C’est impossible,” sê Madame Maxine wie se enorme hand met sy vele voortreflike opale op Fleur se skouer rus. “Ogwards kan nie twee kampioene wil ’ê nie. Dit is uiters onregverdig.”

“Ons was onder die indruk dat jou Ouderdomslyn jonger deelnemers sou uitskakel, Dompeldorius,” sê Karkaroff en die staalharde glimlag speel nog steeds om sy lippe, hoewel sy oë kouer as tevore is. “Andersins sou ons natuurlik ook ’n groter verskeidenheid kandidate uit ons eie skole gebring het.”

“Dis niemand anders as Potter se skuld nie, Karkaroff,” sê Snerp gedemp. Sy swart oë glinster boosaardig. “Moenie vir Dompeldorius blameer vir Potter se vasberadenheid om reëls te oortree nie. Hy trap al oor die tou van hy hier aangeland het –”

“Dankie, Severus,” sê Dompeldorius ferm en Snerp word stil, hoewel sy oë nog steeds vyandig agter die gordyn van olierige swart hare glinster.

Professor Dompeldorius kyk nou af na Harry wat hom vol in die oë staar en probeer om die uitdrukking in die oë agter die halfmaanbrilglase te peil.

“Het jy jou naam in die Beker Vol Vuur gesit, Harry?” vra professor Dompeldorius bedaard.

“Nee,” sê Harry. Hy is daarvan bewus dat almal hom fyn dophou. Snerp maak ’n gedempte geluid van ongeduldige ongeloof vanuit die skadu’s.

“Het jy ’n ouer student gevra om dit vir jou in die Beker Vol Vuur te sit?” sê professor Dompeldorius terwyl hy vir Snerp ignoreer.

“Nee,” sê Harry heftig.

“A, maar natuurlik lieg hy!” roep Madame Maxine uit. Snerp skud sy kop en sy lip krul.

“Hy kon die Ouderdomslyn onmoontlik oorsteek,” sê professor McGonagall skerp. “Ek is seker dat almal daarmee sal saamstem –”

“Domplie-dorr moet ’n fout met daardie lyn ’emaak ’et,” sê Madame Maxine skouerophalend.

“Dit is natuurlik moontlik,” sê professor Dompeldorius beleef.

“Dompeldorius, jy weet heeltemal goed dat jy nie ’n fout gemaak het nie!” sê professor McGonagall vererg. “Regtig, watter absolute onsin! Harry kon daardie lyn nie op sy eie oorgesteek het nie en indien professor Dompeldorius oortuig is dat hy nie ’n ouer student oorreed het om dit vir hom te doen nie, sou ek sê dat die res van ons dit ook maar kan glo!”

Sy gluur ergerlik na professor Snerp.

“Mnr. Crouch . . . mnr. Bagman,” sê Karkaroff en sy stem is weer eens salwend vroom, “julle is ons – h’m – objektiewe beoordelaars. Julle sal darem seker saamstem dat dit uiters onreëlmatig is?”

Bagman vee sy ronde, seunsagtige gesig met sy sakdoek af en kyk na mnr. Crouch wat buite die vuur se ligkring staan, sy gesig half versteek in die skaduwees. Hy lyk vreemd grieselig, die halfdonker laat hom baie ouer lyk en gee aan hom ’n amper skedelagtige voorkoms. Toe hy praat, is dit egter op sy gewone kortaf manier. “Ons moet die reëls volg en die reëls stel dit duidelik dat diegene wie se name uit die Beker Vol Vuur kom, daartoe verbind is om aan die Toernooi deel te neem.”

“Wel, Barty ken die reëls uit sy kop,” sê Bagman stralend toe hy na Karkaroff en Madame Maxine draai asof die saak daarmee afgehandel is.

“Ek dring daarop aan dat die name van die res van my studente weer voorgelê word,” sê Karkaroff. Hy het sy salwende toon en sy glimlag nou laat vaar. Daar is ’n uiters gemene trek op sy gesig. “Julle sal die Beker Vol Vuur weer opstel en ons sal voortgaan om name in te sit totdat elke skool twee kampioene het. Dit is net regverdig, Dompeldorius.”

“Maar Karkaroff, dinge werk nie so nie,” sê Bagman. “Die Beker Vol Vuur het so pas uitgegaan – dit sal eers weer vlam vat wanneer die volgende Toernooi moet begin –”

“– waaraan Durmstrang beslis nie sal deelneem nie!” ontplof Karkaroff. “Na al ons vergaderings en onderhandelings en toegewings het ek nie verwag dat iets van hierdie aard sal gebeur nie! Ek is baie lus om nou pad te gee!”

“’n Leë dreigement, Karkaroff,” grom ’n stem van die deur af. “Jy kan jou kampioen nie nou in die steek laat nie. Hy moet deelneem. Hulle moet almal deelneem. Dis ’n bindende magiese kontrak soos Dompeldorius gesê het. Gerieflik, nê?”

Moodie het die vertrek so pas binnegekom. Hy hink na die vuur en met elke tree van sy regterbeen klink ’n harde *klonk*-geluid op.

“Gerieflik?” sê Karkaroff. “Ek is bevrees ek verstaan jou nie, Moodie.”

Harry besef dat hy minagtend probeer klink asof dit wat Moodie sê hoegenaamd niks werd is nie, maar sy hande gee hom weg; hulle is in vuiste gebal.

"Jy verstaan nie?" sê Moodie sag. "Dis baie eenvoudig, Karkaroff. Iemand het Potter se naam in daardie Beker gesit in die wete dat hy sal moet deelneem indien dit daaruit sou kom."

"Duidelik iemand wat vir 'Ogwarts twee kanse 'ee!" sê Madame Maxine.

"Ek stem heeltemal saam, Madame Maxine," sê Karkaroff en buig vir haar. "Ek sal klagtes indien by die Ministerie vir Towerkuns sowel as by die Internasionale Konfederasie vir Townaars –"

"As daar iemand is wat rede het om te kla, dan is dit Potter," grom Moodie, "maar . . . snaaks genoeg . . . ek het hom nog nie 'n woord hoor ge nie . . ."

"Hoekom sal hy kla?" bars Fleur Delacour uit en stamp haar voet. "Hy het 'n kans om deel te neem, nie waar nie? Ons het almal vir weke en weke gehoop dat ons gekies gaan word! Die eer van ons skole! 'n Duisend Galjoene aan prysgeld – dis 'n kans waarvoor baie sal sterf!"

"Miskien hoop iemand inderdaad dat Potter gaan sterf," sê Moodie met slegs 'n sweem van 'n grom in sy stem.

'n Uiters gespanne stilte volg op hierdie woorde.

Ludo Bagman, wat nog steeds baie angstig lyk, bons senuagtig op en neer en sê, "Moodie, my mens . . . wat 'n ding om te sê!"

"Ons weet almal dat professor Moodie die oggend as vermors beskou indien hy nie ses komplote om hom te vermoor voor middagete ontmasker het nie," sê Karkaroff hard. "Skynbaar leer hy nou sy studente ook om sluipmoord te vrees. 'n Vreemde eienskap in 'n onderwyser wat Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste gee, Dompeldorius, maar jy het seker jou redes."

"Ek verbeel my dus dinge, hè?" grom Moodie. "Ek sien dinge, hè? Dit was 'n bedrewe heks of townaar wat die seun se naam in daardie Beker geplaas het . . ."

"En watter bewyse is daar?" sê Madame Maxine en gooi haar enorme hande op.

"Omdat hulle 'n baie magtige magiese voorwerp gekul het!" sê Moodie. "Dit is inderdaad net 'n baie kragtige Verwarringstowerspreuk wat daardie Beker kon laat vergeet het dat daar net drie skole aan die Toernooi deelneem . . . Ek raai dat Potter se naam onder 'n vierde skool ingehandig is om seker te maak dat hy die enigste een in sy kategorie is . . ."

"Dit lyk asof jy baie hieroor nagedink het, Moodie," sê Karkaroff kil, "en dit is voorwaar 'n besonder vernuftige teorie – hoewel ek verneem dat jy dit onlangs in jou kop gekry het dat een van jou verjaardagpresente 'n listig vermoemde basilisk-eier is en dat jy dit flenters geslaan het voor jy besef het dat dit bloot 'n klok vir 'n koets is. Jy sal dus verstaan as ons jou nie heeltemal ernstig opneem nie . . ."

"Daar is diegene wat onskuldige geleenthede tot hul eie voordeel sal

uitbuit,” kap Moodie in ’n dreigende stem terug. “Dit is my werk om soos Donker towenaars te dink, Karkaroff – soos jy behoort te onthou . . .”

“Alastor!” sê Dompeldorius waarskuwend. Vir ’n oomblik wonder Harry met wie hy praat, maar dan besef hy dat “Maloog” kwalik Moodie se regte naam kan wees. Moodie word stil, hoewel hy nog steeds behaaglik na Karkaroff kyk – Karkaroff se gesig is rooi.

“Hoe hierdie situasie ontstaan het, weet ons nie,” sê Dompeldorius aan almal in die vertrek. “Dit lyk egter vir my asof ons geen keuse het as om dit te aanvaar nie. Sowel Cedric as Harry is gekies om aan die Toernooi deel te neem. Dit sal hulle dus moet doen . . .”

“A, maar Domplic-dorr –”

“My liewe Madame Maxine, as jy ’n alternatief kan voorstel, luister ek graag daarna.”

Dompeldorius wag, maar Madame Maxine antwoord nie; sy gluur bloot. Sy is ook nie die enigste een nie. Snerp lyk woedend; Karkaroff briesend. Bagman, daarenteen, lyk nogal opgewonde.

“Wel, sal ons wegval?” sê hy terwyl hy sy hande teen mekaar vryf en in die rondte glimlag. “Ons moet ons kampioene hul opdragte gee, nè? Barty, die eer is joune.”

Dit lyk asof mnr. Crouch uit ’n diep mymering wakker skrik.

“Ja,” sê hy, “opdragte. Ja . . . die eerste taak . . .”

Hy beweeg tot in die lig van die vuur. Harry kan van naby sien dat hy siek lyk. Daar is donker skaduwees onder sy oë en ’n dun, papieragtige voorkoms aan sy verrimpelde vel wat nie tydens die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker daar was nie.

“Die eerste taak is ontwerp om jul durf te toets,” sê hy vir Harry, Cedric, Fleur en Krum, “dus gaan ons nie vir julle sê wat dit is nie. Dapperheid, wanneer die onbekende jou in die gesig staar, is ’n belangrike eienenskap in ’n towenaar . . . baie belangrik . . .”

“Die eerste taak sal op die vier-en-twintigste November in die teenwoordigheid van die ander studente en die paneel van beoordelaars plaasvind.

“Die kampioene sal nie toegelaat word om hulp van enige aard te vra of te aanvaar van hul onderwysers om die take vir die Toernooi te voltooi nie. Die kampioene sal vir die eerste taak slegs hul towerstawwe by hulle hê. Hulle sal ingelig word oor die tweede taak sodra die eerste een afgehandel is. Weens die veeleisende en tydrawende aard van die Toernooi sal die kampioene nie einde-van-die-jaar toetse hoef te skryf nie.”

Mnr. Crouch draai om en kyk na Dompeldorius. “Ek dink dit is al, nè, Albus?”

“Ek skat so,” sê Dompeldorius, wat ietwat besorg na mnr. Crouch staar. “Is jy seker jy wil nie vannag by Hogwarts oorslaap nie, Barty?”

“Nee, Dompeldorius, ek moet teruggaan Ministerie toe,” sê mnr.

Crouch. "Dit is op die oomblik 'n baie besige, baie moeilike tyd . . . het julle Weatherby in bevel gelaat . . . baie entoesiasies . . . 'n bietjie oorentoesiasies, om die waarheid te sê . . ."

"Jy sal darem seker ten minste 'n ietsie saam met ons drink voor jy gaan?" sê Dompeldorius.

"Komaan, Barty, ek bly!" sê Bagman hartlik. "Alles gebeur nou by Hogwatts, weet jy, baie meer opwindend hier as by die kantoor!"

"Ek dink nie so nie, Ludo," sê Crouch met 'n sweem van sy ou ongeduld.

"Professor Karkaroff – Madame Maxine – 'n laaste sopie?" vra Dompeldorius.

Madame Maxine het egter reeds haar arm om Fleur se skouers geslaan en is besig om haar haastig uit die vertrek te lei. Harry hoor hoe hulle baie vinnig in Frans praat toe hulle die Groot Saal instap. Karkaroff wink vir Krum en hulle loop ook uit, hoewel in stilte.

"Harry, Cedric, ek stel voor dat julle gaan slaap," sê Dompeldorius en glimlag vir albei van hulle. "Ek is seker dat Griffindor en Hoesenproes vir julle wag om saam met julle fees te vier en dit sal 'n jammerte wees om hulle so 'n uitstekende verskoning om 'n groot lawaai en 'n yslike gemors te maak te ontnem."

Harry loer na Cedric, en toe hy knik, loop hulle saam uit.

Die Groot Saal is nou heeltemal verlate; die kerse brand laag en laat die pampoene se getande glimlagte grieselrig flikker.

"So," sê Cedric met 'n klein glimlaggie. "Ons kom dus weer teen mekaar te staan!"

"Ja, seker," sê Harry. Hy kan regtig aan niks anders dink om te sê nie. Die binnekant van sy kop voel totaal verward, asof sy brein geplunder is.

"So . . . sê my . . ." sê Cedric toe hulle die Ingangsportaal bereik wat nou, in die afwesigheid van die Beker Vol Vuur, slegs deur fakkels verlig word. "Hoe het jy jou naam daarin gekry?"

"Ek het nie," sê Harry en staar op na hom. "Ek het dit nie ingesit nie. Ek het die waarheid gepraat."

"H'm . . . oukei," sê Cedric. Harry kan sien dat hy hom nie glo nie. "Wel . . . sien jou later."

Pleks dat hy met die marmertappe boontoe klim, loop Cedric na 'n deur regs. Harry staan en luister hoe hy met die kliptrappe ondertoe stap en klim dan die marmertappe stadig uit.

Gaan enigiemand behalwe Ron en Hermien hom glo, of gaan almal dink dat hy homself vir die Toernooi ingeskryf het? Maar hoe kan enig-een dit wil dink? Hy moet teen mededingers wat drie jaar meer toweropleiding as hy het, deelneem; hy moet take onderneem wat nie net baie gevaarlik klink nie, maar boonop ten aanskoue van honderde mense. Ja, hy het wel daaraan gedink . . . daaroor gefantaseer . . . maar dit was net

'n grap, 'n leë soort droom . . . hy het dit nooit regtig ernstig oorweeg om deel te neem nie . . .

Iemand anders het dit beplan . . . iemand wat wil hê dat hy aan die Toernooi moet deelneem en wat seker gemaak het dat hy ingeskryf is. Hoekom? Om hom plesier te verskaf? Hy glo nie . . .

Dalk om te sien hoe hy 'n gek van homself maak? Wel, hul wens gaan waarskynlik bewaarheid word . . .

Maar om hom *dood* te maak? Was Moodie net sy gewone paranoïese self? Het iemand nie dalk Harry se naam bloot vir die grap in die Beker gesit nie, as 'n soort poets? Wil iemand hom werklik dood hê?

Harry kan hierdie vraag dadelik beantwoord. Ja, iemand wil hom dood hê, iemand wil hom al dood hê sedert hy net 'n jaar oud is . . . die heer Woldemort. Maar hoe kon Woldemort seker maak dat Harry se naam in die Beker Vol Vuur beland het? Woldemort is dan kamma iewers ver weg, in die een of ander afgeleë land, waar hy wegkruip, alleen . . . magteloos en swak.

Tog, in daardie droom net voor hy wakker geword het, toe sy litteken seer was, was Woldemort nie alleen nie . . . hy het met Wurmstert gepraat . . . hulle het Harry se moord beplan . . .

Dis met 'n skok dat Harry homself reeds voor die Vet Vrou bevind. Hy het skaars agtergekom waarheen hy loop. Hy is ook verbaas om te sien dat sy nie alleen in haar raam is nie. Die beplooide heks wat na haar buurman se portret gegaan het toe hy daar onder by die kampioene aangesluit het, sit nou selfvoldaan langs die Vet Vrou. Sy moet haar deur elke portret langs sewe stelle trappe gehaas het om voor hom hier te kan wees. Sowel sy as die Vet Vrou kyk vol belangstelling na hom.

“Wel, wel, wel,” sê die Vet Vrou, “Violet het my nou net alles vertel. Wie is so pas tot skoolkampioen verkies?”

“Spekskiet,” sê Harry bot.

“Dit is baie beslis nie!” sê die bleek heks verontwaardig.

“Nee, nee, Vi, dis die wagwoord,” sê die Vet Vrou kalmerend terwyl sy aan haar skarniere vorentoe swaai en Harry by die geselskamer inlaat.

Die geraas wat Harry se ore tref toe die portret oopgaan, slaan hom amper onderstebo. Die volgende oomblik word hy deur 'n dosyn pare hande by die geselskamer ingesleep en staan hy voor die hele Huis Grifindor wat almal skreeu, juig en fluit.

“Jy moes vir ons gesê het dat jy ingeskryf het!” bulder Fred; hy lyk half ergerlik en half beïndruk.

“Hoe't jy dit gedoen sonder om 'n baard te kry? Briljant!” brul George.

“Ek het nie,” sê Harry. “Ek weet nie hoe –”

Angelina kom ook op hom afgestorm. “Oe, ek wens dit was ek, maar ten minste is dit iemand van Grifindor –”

"Jy sal Diggory kan terugkry vir daardie laaste Kwiddiekwedstryd, Harry!" gil Katy Bell, nog een van Griffindor se Jaers.

"Ons het kos, Harry, kom kry –"

"Ek's nie honger nie, ek het genoeg by die fees –"

Niemand wil egter aanvaar dat hy nie honger is nie; niemand wil aanvaar dat hy nie sy naam in die Beker gesit het nie; nie een enkele persoon kom agter dat hy nie in die bui vir feesvierings is nie . . . Lee Jordaan het 'n Griffindorbanier iewers uitgegrawe en dring daarop aan om dit soos 'n mantel om Harry te drapeer. Daar is geen wegkomkans vir Harry nie; elke keer dat hy probeer om na die trappe weg te glip, maak die skare om hom toe, dwing hulle nog 'n Botterbier aan hom op en prop hulle tjips en grondboontjies in sy hande . . . almal wil weet hoe hy dit reggekry het om Dompeldorius se Ouderdomslyn te fnuik en hoe hy sy naam in die Beker gekry het . . .

"Ek het nie," sê hy oor en oor, "ek weet nie hoe dit gebeur het nie."

Maar niemand slaan hierop ag nie. Hy kon net sowel niks gesê het nie.

"Ek is moeg!" brul hy uiteindelik omtrent 'n halfuur later. "Nee, regtig, George – ek gaan bed toe –"

Meer as enigiets anders wil hy vir Ron en Hermien kry, soek hy rus vir sy siel, maar dit lyk nie asof hulle in die geselskamer is nie. Hy hou vol dat hy wil gaan slaap en loop die Creevey-broers amper uit die grond toe hulle hom by die trappe probeer voorkeer. Harry slaag daarin om almal af te skud en klim die trappe na die slaapsaal so vinnig moontlik uit.

Tot sy groot verligting lê Ron op sy bed in die andersins leë slaapsaal. Hy het nog al sy klere aan, en toe Harry die deur agter hom toeslaan, kyk hy op.

"Waar was jy?" sê Harry.

"O, hallo," sê Ron.

Hy glimlag, maar dit lyk na 'n baie vreemde, stywe soort grinnik. Harry besef skielik dat hy nog steeds die skarlaken Griffindorbanier wat Lee om hom vasgebind het, aanhet. Hy wil dit haastig afhaal, maar dit is styf vasgeknoop. Ron lê bewegingloos op die bed en kyk hoe Harry sukkel om dit los te kry.

"So," sê hy toe Harry die banier uiteindelik afgekry en in 'n hoek gegooi het. "Geluk."

"Wat bedoel jy met geluk?" sê Harry en staar na Ron. Daar is beslis iets verkeerd met die manier waarop Ron glimlag; dis meer soos 'n grynslag.

"Wel . . . niemand kon oor die Ouderdomslyn kom nie," sê Ron. "Nie eens Fred en George nie. Wat het jy gebruik – die onsigbaarheidsmantel?"

"Die onsigbaarheidsmantel sou my nie oor daardie lyn gekry het nie," sê Harry stadig.

"O, goed," sê Ron. "Ek het gedog dat jy my sou sê as dit die mantel

was . . . al twee van ons sou daaronder ingepas het, nie waar nie? Maar jy het 'n ander manier gekry, nè?"

"Luister," sê Harry. "Ek het nie my naam in daardie Beker gesit nie. Iemand anders moet dit gedoen het."

Ron lig sy wenkbroue. "Hoekom sou hulle dit wou doen?"

"Ek weet nie," sê Harry. Hy voel dat dit darem baie melodramaties sal wees om te sê "om my te vermoor".

Ron se wenkbroue lig nou so hoog dat hulle gevaar loop om onder sy hare te verdwyn.

"Dis oukei, weet jy, jy kan maar vir my die waarheid vertel," sê hy. "As jy nie wil hê dat iemand anders moet weet nie, is dit goed so, maar ek kan nie verstaan hoekom jy moet lieg nie, jy't tog nie daaroor in die moeilikheid gekom nie, het jy? Daardie vriendin van die Vet Vrou, daardie Violet, sy't klaar vir ons alles vertel, hoe Dompeldorius jou toegelaat het. 'n Duisend Galjoene as prysgeld, hè? En jy hoef ook nie aan die einde van die jaar toetse te skryf nie . . ."

"Ek het my naam *nie* in daardie Beker gesit nie!" sê Harry wat nou begin kwaad word.

"Ja, oukei," sê Ron op presies dieselfde skeptiese trant as Cedric. "Dis net dat jy vanoggend gesê het dat jy dit laas nag sou gedoen het, wanneer niemand jou kon sien nie . . . ek's nie dom nie, weet jy."

"Jy kom flippen na daaraan," snou Harry hom toe.

"O ja?" sê Ron en nou is daar nie 'n spoor van 'n glimlag, geforseer of andersins, op sy gesig nie. "Jy wil seker nou bed toe gaan, Harry, jy moet seker môre vroeg opstaan vir 'n fotosessie of iets."

Hy pluk die behangsels om sy hemelbed toe sodat Harry, wat nog by die deur staan, na die donkerrooi ferweelgordyne moet staar waaragter een van die min mense wat hy gedink het hom sou glo nou versteek is.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



THE WEIGHING OF THE WANDS

When Harry woke up on Sunday morning, it took him a moment to remember why he felt so miserable and worried. Then the memory of the previous night rolled over him. He sat up and ripped back the curtains of his own four-poster, intending to talk to Ron, to force Ron to believe him — only to find that Ron's bed was empty; he had obviously gone down to breakfast.

Harry dressed and went down the spiral staircase into the common room. The moment he appeared, the people who had already finished breakfast broke into applause again. The prospect of going down into the Great Hall and facing the rest of the Gryffindors, all treating him like some sort of hero, was not inviting; it was that, however, or stay here and allow himself to be cornered by the Creevey brothers, who

were both beckoning frantically to him to join them. He walked resolutely over to the portrait hole, pushed it open, climbed out of it, and found himself face-to-face with Hermione.

“Hello,” she said, holding up a stack of toast, which she was carrying in a napkin. “I brought you this. . . . Want to go for a walk?”

“Good idea,” said Harry gratefully.

They went downstairs, crossed the entrance hall quickly without looking in at the Great Hall, and were soon striding across the lawn toward the lake, where the Durmstrang ship was moored, reflected blackly in the water. It was a chilly morning, and they kept moving, munching their toast, as Harry told Hermione exactly what had happened after he had left the Gryffindor table the night before. To his immense relief, Hermione accepted his story without question.

“Well, of course I knew you hadn’t entered yourself,” she said when he’d finished telling her about the scene in the chamber off the Hall. “The look on your face when Dumbledore read out your name! But the question is, who *did* put it in? Because Moody’s right, Harry . . . I don’t think any student could have done it . . . they’d never be able to fool the goblet, or get over Dumbledore’s —”

“Have you seen Ron?” Harry interrupted.

Hermione hesitated.

“Erm . . . yes . . . he was at breakfast,” she said.

“Does he still think I entered myself?”

“Well . . . no, I don’t think so . . . not *really*,” said Hermione awkwardly.

“What’s that supposed to mean, ‘not *really*’?”

“Oh Harry, isn’t it obvious?” Hermione said despairingly. “He’s

jealous!”

“*Jealous?*” Harry said incredulously. “Jealous of what? He wants to make a prat of himself in front of the whole school, does he?”

“Look,” said Hermione patiently, “it’s always you who gets all the attention, you know it is. I know it’s not your fault,” she added quickly, seeing Harry open his mouth furiously. “I know you don’t ask for it . . . but — well — you know, Ron’s got all those brothers to compete against at home, and you’re his best friend, and you’re really famous — he’s always shunted to one side whenever people see you, and he puts up with it, and he never mentions it, but I suppose this is just one time too many. . . .”

“Great,” said Harry bitterly. “Really great. Tell him from me I’ll swap any time he wants. Tell him from me he’s welcome to it. . . . People gawping at my forehead everywhere I go. . . .”

“I’m not telling him anything,” Hermione said shortly. “Tell him yourself. It’s the only way to sort this out.”

“I’m not running around after him trying to make him grow up!” Harry said, so loudly that several owls in a nearby tree took flight in alarm. “Maybe he’ll believe I’m not enjoying myself once I’ve got my neck broken or —”

“That’s not funny,” said Hermione quietly. “That’s not funny at all.” She looked extremely anxious. “Harry, I’ve been thinking — you know what we’ve got to do, don’t you? Straight away, the moment we get back to the castle?”

“Yeah, give Ron a good kick up the —”

“*Write to Sirius.* You’ve got to tell him what’s happened. He asked you to keep him posted on everything that’s going on at Hogwarts. . . .

It's almost as if he expected something like this to happen. I brought some parchment and a quill out with me —”

“Come off it,” said Harry, looking around to check that they couldn't be overheard, but the grounds were quite deserted. “He came back to the country just because my scar twinged. He'll probably come bursting right into the castle if I tell him someone's entered me in the Triwizard Tournament —”

“*He'd want you to tell him,*” said Hermione sternly. “He's going to find out anyway —”

“How?”

“Harry, this isn't going to be kept quiet,” said Hermione, very seriously. “This tournament's famous, and you're famous. I'll be really surprised if there isn't anything in the *Daily Prophet* about you competing. . . . You're already in half the books about You-Know-Who, you know . . . and Sirius would rather hear it from you, I know he would.”

“Okay, okay, I'll write to him,” said Harry, throwing his last piece of toast into the lake. They both stood and watched it floating there for a moment, before a large tentacle rose out of the water and scooped it beneath the surface. Then they returned to the castle.

“Whose owl am I going to use?” Harry said as they climbed the stairs. “He told me not to use Hedwig again.”

“Ask Ron if you can borrow —”

“I'm not asking Ron for anything,” Harry said flatly.

“Well, borrow one of the school owls, then, anyone can use them,” said Hermione.


They went up to the Owlery. Hermione gave Harry a piece of

parchment, a quill, and a bottle of ink, then strolled around the long lines of perches, looking at all the different owls, while Harry sat down against a wall and wrote his letter.

Dear Sirius,

You told me to keep you posted on what's happening at Hogwarts, so here goes — I don't know if you've heard, but the Triwizard Tournament's happening this year and on Saturday night I got picked as a fourth champion. I don't know who put my name in the Goblet of Fire, because I didn't. The other Hogwarts champion is Cedric Diggory, from Hufflepuff.

He paused at this point, thinking. He had an urge to say something about the large weight of anxiety that seemed to have settled inside his chest since last night, but he couldn't think how to translate this into words, so he simply dipped his quill back into the ink bottle and wrote,

Hope you're okay, and Buckbeak — 

“Finished,” he told Hermione, getting to his feet and brushing straw off his robes. At this, Hedwig came fluttering down onto his shoulder and held out her leg.

“I can't use you,” Harry told her, looking around for the school owls. “I've got to use one of these. . . .”

Hedwig gave a very loud hoot and took off so suddenly that her

talons cut into his shoulder. She kept her back to Harry all the time he was tying his letter to the leg of a large barn owl. When the barn owl had flown off, Harry reached out to stroke Hedwig, but she clicked her beak furiously and soared up into the rafters out of reach.

“First Ron, then you,” said Harry angrily. “*This isn’t my fault.*”

If Harry had thought that matters would improve once everyone got used to the idea of him being champion, the following day showed him how mistaken he was. He could no longer avoid the rest of the school once he was back at lessons — and it was clear that the rest of the school, just like the Gryffindors, thought Harry had entered himself for the tournament. Unlike the Gryffindors, however, they did not seem impressed.

The Hufflepuffs, who were usually on excellent terms with the Gryffindors, had turned remarkably cold toward the whole lot of them. One Herbology lesson was enough to demonstrate this. It was plain that the Hufflepuffs felt that Harry had stolen their champion’s glory; a feeling exacerbated, perhaps, by the fact that Hufflepuff House very rarely got any glory, and that Cedric was one of the few who had ever given them any, having beaten Gryffindor once at Quidditch. Ernie Macmillan and Justin Finch-Fletchley, with whom Harry normally got on very well, did not talk to him even though they were repotting Bouncing Bulbs at the same tray — though they did laugh rather unpleasantly when one of the Bouncing Bulbs wriggled free from Harry’s grip and smacked him hard in the face. Ron wasn’t talking to Harry either. Hermione sat between them, making very forced conversation, but though both answered her normally, they avoided making eye contact with each other. Harry thought even

Professor Sprout seemed distant with him — but then, she was Head of Hufflepuff House.

He would have been looking forward to seeing Hagrid under normal circumstances, but Care of Magical Creatures meant seeing the Slytherins too — the first time he would come face-to-face with them since becoming champion.

Predictably, Malfoy arrived at Hagrid's cabin with his familiar sneer firmly in place.

“Ah, look, boys, it's the champion,” he said to Crabbe and Goyle the moment he got within earshot of Harry. “Got your autograph books? Better get a signature now, because I doubt he's going to be around much longer. . . . Half the Triwizard champions have died . . . how long d'you reckon you're going to last, Potter? Ten minutes into the first task's my bet.”

Crabbe and Goyle guffawed sycophantically, but Malfoy had to stop there, because Hagrid emerged from the back of his cabin balancing a teetering tower of crates, each containing a very large Blast-Ended Skrewt. To the class's horror, Hagrid proceeded to explain that the reason the skrewts had been killing one another was an excess of pent-up energy, and that the solution would be for each student to fix a leash on a skrewt and take it for a short walk. The only good thing about this plan was that it distracted Malfoy completely.

“Take this thing for a walk?” he repeated in disgust, staring into one of the boxes. “And where exactly are we supposed to fix the leash? Around the sting, the blasting end, or the sucker?”

“Roun' the middle,” said Hagrid, demonstrating. “Er — yeh might

want ter put on yer dragon-hide gloves, jus' as an extra precaution, like. Harry — you come here an' help me with this big one. . . .”

Hagrid's real intention, however, was to talk to Harry away from the rest of the class. He waited until everyone else had set off with their skrewts, then turned to Harry and said, very seriously, “So — yer competin', Harry. In the tournament. School champion.”

“One of the champions,” Harry corrected him.

Hagrid's beetle-black eyes looked very anxious under his wild eyebrows.

“No idea who put yeh in fer it, Harry?”

“You believe I didn't do it, then?” said Harry, concealing with difficulty the rush of gratitude he felt at Hagrid's words.

“Course I do,” Hagrid grunted. “Yeh say it wasn' you, an' I believe yeh — an' Dumbledore believes yer, an' all.”

“Wish I knew who *did* do it,” said Harry bitterly.

The pair of them looked out over the lawn; the class was widely scattered now, and all in great difficulty. The skrewts were now over three feet long, and extremely powerful. No longer shell-less and colorless, they had developed a kind of thick, grayish, shiny armor. They looked like a cross between giant scorpions and elongated crabs — but still without recognizable heads or eyes. They had become immensely strong and very hard to control.

“Look like they're havin' fun, don' they?” Hagrid said happily. Harry assumed he was talking about the skrewts, because his classmates certainly weren't; every now and then, with an alarming *bang*, one of the skrewts' ends would explode, causing it to shoot forward several yards, and more than one person was being dragged

along on their stomach, trying desperately to get back on their feet.

“Ah, I don’ know, Harry,” Hagrid sighed suddenly, looking back down at him with a worried expression on his face. “School champion . . . everythin’ seems ter happen ter you, doesn’ it?”

Harry didn’t answer. Yes, everything did seem to happen to him . . . that was more or less what Hermione had said as they had walked around the lake, and that was the reason, according to her, that Ron was no longer talking to him.

The next few days were some of Harry’s worst at Hogwarts. The closest he had ever come to feeling like this had been during those months, in his second year, when a large part of the school had suspected him of attacking his fellow students. But Ron had been on his side then. He thought he could have coped with the rest of the school’s behavior if he could just have had Ron back as a friend, but he wasn’t going to try and persuade Ron to talk to him if Ron didn’t want to. Nevertheless, it was lonely with dislike pouring in on him from all sides.

He could understand the Hufflepuffs’ attitude, even if he didn’t like it; they had their own champion to support. He expected nothing less than vicious insults from the Slytherins — he was highly unpopular there and always had been, because he had helped Gryffindor beat them so often, both at Quidditch and in the Inter-House Championship. But he had hoped the Ravenclaws might have found it in their hearts to support him as much as Cedric. He was wrong, however. Most Ravenclaws seemed to think that he had been desperate to earn himself a bit more fame by tricking the goblet into accepting his name.

Then there was the fact that Cedric looked the part of a champion so much more than he did. Exceptionally handsome, with his straight nose, dark hair, and gray eyes, it was hard to say who was receiving more admiration these days, Cedric or Viktor Krum. Harry actually saw the same sixth-year girls who had been so keen to get Krum's autograph begging Cedric to sign their school bags one lunchtime.

Meanwhile there was no reply from Sirius, Hedwig was refusing to come anywhere near him, Professor Trelawney was predicting his death with even more certainty than usual, and he did so badly at Summoning Charms in Professor Flitwick's class that he was given extra homework — the only person to get any, apart from Neville.

"It's really not that difficult, Harry," Hermione tried to reassure him as they left Flitwick's class — she had been making objects zoom across the room to her all lesson, as though she were some sort of weird magnet for board dusters, wastepaper baskets, and lunascopes. "You just weren't concentrating properly —"

"Wonder why that was," said Harry darkly as Cedric Diggory walked past, surrounded by a large group of simpering girls, all of whom looked at Harry as though he were a particularly large Blast-Ended Skrewt. "Still — never mind, eh? Double Potions to look forward to this afternoon. . . ."

Double Potions was always a horrible experience, but these days it was nothing short of torture. Being shut in a dungeon for an hour and a half with Snape and the Slytherins, all of whom seemed determined to punish Harry as much as possible for daring to become school champion, was about the most unpleasant thing Harry could imagine. He had already struggled through one Friday's worth, with

Hermione sitting next to him intoning “ignore them, ignore them, ignore them” under her breath, and he couldn’t see why today should be any better.

When he and Hermione arrived at Snape’s dungeon after lunch, they found the Slytherins waiting outside, each and every one of them wearing a large badge on the front of his or her robes. For one wild moment Harry thought they were S.P.E.W. badges — then he saw that they all bore the same message, in luminous red letters that burnt brightly in the dimly lit underground passage:

**SUPPORT CEDRIC DIGGORY—
THE REAL HOGWARTS CHAMPION!**

“Like them, Potter?” said Malfoy loudly as Harry approached. “And this isn’t all they do — look!”

He pressed his badge into his chest, and the message upon it vanished, to be replaced by another one, which glowed green:

POTTER STINKS

The Slytherins howled with laughter. Each of them pressed their badges too, until the message *POTTER STINKS* was shining brightly all around Harry. He felt the heat rise in his face and neck.

“Oh *very* funny,” Hermione said sarcastically to Pansy Parkinson and her gang of Slytherin girls, who were laughing harder than anyone, “really *witty*.”

Ron was standing against the wall with Dean and Seamus. He wasn't laughing, but he wasn't sticking up for Harry either.

"Want one, Granger?" said Malfoy, holding out a badge to Hermione. "I've got loads. But don't touch my hand, now. I've just washed it, you see; don't want a Mudblood sliming it up."

Some of the anger Harry had been feeling for days and days seemed to burst through a dam in his chest. He had reached for his wand before he'd thought what he was doing. People all around them scrambled out of the way, backing down the corridor.

"Harry!" Hermione said warningly.

"Go on, then, Potter," Malfoy said quietly, drawing out his own wand. "Moody's not here to look after you now — do it, if you've got the guts —"

For a split second, they looked into each other's eyes, then, at exactly the same time, both acted.

"Furnunculus!" Harry yelled.

"Densaugeo!" screamed Malfoy.

Jets of light shot from both wands, hit each other in midair, and ricocheted off at angles — Harry's hit Goyle in the face, and Malfoy's hit Hermione. Goyle bellowed and put his hands to his nose, where great ugly boils were springing up — Hermione, whimpering in panic, was clutching her mouth.

"Hermione!"

Ron had hurried forward to see what was wrong with her; Harry turned and saw Ron dragging Hermione's hand away from her face. It wasn't a pretty sight. Hermione's front teeth — already larger than average — were now growing at an alarming rate; she was looking

more and more like a beaver as her teeth elongated, past her bottom lip, toward her chin — panic-stricken, she felt them and let out a terrified cry.

“And what is all this noise about?” said a soft, deadly voice.

Snape had arrived. The Slytherins clamored to give their explanations; Snape pointed a long yellow finger at Malfoy and said, “Explain.”

“Potter attacked me, sir —”

“We attacked each other at the same time!” Harry shouted.

“— and he hit Goyle — look —”

Snape examined Goyle, whose face now resembled something that would have been at home in a book on poisonous fungi.

“Hospital wing, Goyle,” Snape said calmly.

“Malfoy got Hermione!” Ron said. “*Look!*”

He forced Hermione to show Snape her teeth — she was doing her best to hide them with her hands, though this was difficult as they had now grown down past her collar. Pansy Parkinson and the other Slytherin girls were doubled up with silent giggles, pointing at Hermione from behind Snape’s back.

Snape looked coldly at Hermione, then said, “I see no difference.”

Hermione let out a whimper; her eyes filled with tears, she turned on her heel and ran, ran all the way up the corridor and out of sight.

It was lucky, perhaps, that both Harry and Ron started shouting at Snape at the same time; lucky their voices echoed so much in the stone corridor, for in the confused din, it was impossible for him to hear exactly what they were calling him. He got the gist, however.

“Let’s see,” he said, in his silkiest voice. “Fifty points from

Gryffindor and a detention each for Potter and Weasley. Now get inside, or it'll be a week's worth of detentions."

Harry's ears were ringing. The injustice of it made him want to curse Snape into a thousand slimy pieces. He passed Snape, walked with Ron to the back of the dungeon, and slammed his bag down onto the table. Ron was shaking with anger too — for a moment, it felt as though everything was back to normal between them, but then Ron turned and sat down with Dean and Seamus instead, leaving Harry alone at his table. On the other side of the dungeon, Malfoy turned his back on Snape and pressed his badge, smirking. *POTTER STINKS* flashed once more across the room.

Harry sat there staring at Snape as the lesson began, picturing horrific things happening to him. . . . If only he knew how to do the Cruciatus Curse . . . he'd have Snape flat on his back like that spider, jerking and twitching. . . .

"Antidotes!" said Snape, looking around at them all, his cold black eyes glittering unpleasantly. "You should all have prepared your recipes now. I want you to brew them carefully, and then, we will be selecting someone on whom to test one. . . ."

Snape's eyes met Harry's, and Harry knew what was coming. Snape was going to poison *him*. Harry imagined picking up his cauldron, and sprinting to the front of the class, and bringing it down on Snape's greasy head —

And then a knock on the dungeon door burst in on Harry's thoughts. It was Colin Creevey; he edged into the room, beaming at Harry, and walked up to Snape's desk at the front of the room.

"Yes?" said Snape curtly.

“Please, sir, I’m supposed to take Harry Potter upstairs.”

Snape stared down his hooked nose at Colin, whose smile faded from his eager face.

“Potter has another hour of Potions to complete,” said Snape coldly. “He will come upstairs when this class is finished.”

Colin went pink.

“Sir — sir, Mr. Bagman wants him,” he said nervously. “All the champions have got to go, I think they want to take photographs. . . .”

Harry would have given anything he owned to have stopped Colin saying those last few words. He chanced half a glance at Ron, but Ron was staring determinedly at the ceiling.

“Very well, very well,” Snape snapped. “Potter, leave your things here, I want you back down here later to test your antidote.”

“Please, sir — he’s got to take his things with him,” squeaked Colin. “All the champions —”

“Very *well*!” said Snape. “Potter — take your bag and get out of my sight!”

Harry swung his bag over his shoulder, got up, and headed for the door. As he walked through the Slytherin desks, *POTTER STINKS* flashed at him from every direction.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it, Harry?” said Colin, starting to speak the moment Harry had closed the dungeon door behind him. “Isn’t it, though? You being champion?”

“Yeah, really amazing,” said Harry heavily as they set off toward the steps into the entrance hall. “What do they want photos for, Colin?”

“The *Daily Prophet*, I think!”

“Great,” said Harry dully. “Exactly what I need. More publicity.”

“Good luck!” said Colin when they had reached the right room. Harry knocked on the door and entered.

He was in a fairly small classroom; most of the desks had been pushed away to the back of the room, leaving a large space in the middle; three of them, however, had been placed end-to-end in front of the blackboard and covered with a long length of velvet. Five chairs had been set behind the velvet-covered desks, and Ludo Bagman was sitting in one of them, talking to a witch Harry had never seen before, who was wearing magenta robes.

Viktor Krum was standing moodily in a corner as usual and not talking to anybody. Cedric and Fleur were in conversation. Fleur looked a good deal happier than Harry had seen her so far; she kept throwing back her head so that her long silvery hair caught the light. A paunchy man, holding a large black camera that was smoking slightly, was watching Fleur out of the corner of his eye.

Bagman suddenly spotted Harry, got up quickly, and bounded forward.

“Ah, here he is! Champion number four! In you come, Harry, in you come . . . nothing to worry about, it’s just the wand weighing ceremony, the rest of the judges will be here in a moment —”

“Wand weighing?” Harry repeated nervously.

“We have to check that your wands are fully functional, no problems, you know, as they’re your most important tools in the tasks ahead,” said Bagman. “The expert’s upstairs now with Dumbledore. And then there’s going to be a little photo shoot. This is Rita Skeeter,” he added, gesturing toward the witch in magenta robes.

“She’s doing a small piece on the tournament for the *Daily Prophet*. . . .”

“Maybe not *that* small, Ludo,” said Rita Skeeter, her eyes on Harry.

Her hair was set in elaborate and curiously rigid curls that contrasted oddly with her heavy-jawed face. She wore jeweled spectacles. The thick fingers clutching her crocodile-skin handbag ended in two-inch nails, painted crimson.

“I wonder if I could have a little word with Harry before we start?” she said to Bagman, but still gazing fixedly at Harry. “The youngest champion, you know . . . to add a bit of color?”

“Certainly!” cried Bagman. “That is — if Harry has no objection?”

“Er —” said Harry.

“Lovely,” said Rita Skeeter, and in a second, her scarlet-taloned fingers had Harry’s upper arm in a surprisingly strong grip, and she was steering him out of the room again and opening a nearby door.

“We don’t want to be in there with all that noise,” she said. “Let’s see . . . ah, yes, this is nice and cozy.”

It was a broom cupboard. Harry stared at her.

“Come along, dear — that’s right — lovely,” said Rita Skeeter again, perching herself precariously upon an upturned bucket, pushing Harry down onto a cardboard box, and closing the door, throwing them into darkness. “Let’s see now . . .”

She unsnapped her crocodile-skin handbag and pulled out a handful of candles, which she lit with a wave of her wand and magicked into midair, so that they could see what they were doing.

“You won’t mind, Harry, if I use a Quick-Quotes Quill? It leaves me free to talk to you normally. . . .”

“A what?” said Harry.

Rita Skeeter’s smile widened. Harry counted three gold teeth. She reached again into her crocodile bag and drew out a long acid-green quill and a roll of parchment, which she stretched out between them on a crate of Mrs. Skower’s All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover. She put the tip of the green quill into her mouth, sucked it for a moment with apparent relish, then placed it upright on the parchment, where it stood balanced on its point, quivering slightly.

“Testing . . . my name is Rita Skeeter, *Daily Prophet* reporter.”

Harry looked down quickly at the quill. The moment Rita Skeeter had spoken, the green quill had started to scribble, skidding across the parchment:

*Attractive blonde Rita Skeeter, forty-three, whose
savage quill has punctured many inflated reputations —*

“Lovely,” said Rita Skeeter, yet again, and she ripped the top piece of parchment off, crumpled it up, and stuffed it into her handbag. Now she leaned toward Harry and said, “So, Harry . . . what made you decide to enter the Triwizard Tournament?”

“Er —” said Harry again, but he was distracted by the quill. Even though he wasn’t speaking, it was dashing across the parchment, and in its wake he could make out a fresh sentence:

*An ugly scar, souvenir of a tragic past, disfigures the
otherwise charming face of Harry Potter, whose eyes —*

“Ignore the quill, Harry,” said Rita Skeeter firmly. Reluctantly, Harry looked up at her instead. “Now — why did you decide to enter the tournament, Harry?”

“I didn’t,” said Harry. “I don’t know how my name got into the Goblet of Fire. I didn’t put it in there.”

Rita Skeeter raised one heavily penciled eyebrow.

“Come now, Harry, there’s no need to be scared of getting into trouble. We all know you shouldn’t really have entered at all. But don’t worry about that. Our readers love a rebel.”

“But I didn’t enter,” Harry repeated. “I don’t know who —”

“How do you feel about the tasks ahead?” said Rita Skeeter. “Excited? Nervous?”

“I haven’t really thought . . . yeah, nervous, I suppose,” said Harry. His insides squirmed uncomfortably as he spoke.

“Champions have died in the past, haven’t they?” said Rita Skeeter briskly. “Have you thought about that at all?”

“Well . . . they say it’s going to be a lot safer this year,” said Harry.

The quill whizzed across the parchment between them, back and forward as though it were skating.

“Of course, you’ve looked death in the face before, haven’t you?” said Rita Skeeter, watching him closely. “How would you say that’s affected you?”

“Er,” said Harry, yet again.

“Do you think that the trauma in your past might have made you keen to prove yourself? To live up to your name? Do you think that perhaps you were tempted to enter the Triwizard Tournament because —”

“*I didn’t enter,*” said Harry, starting to feel irritated.

“Can you remember your parents at all?” said Rita Skeeter, talking over him.

“No,” said Harry.

“How do you think they’d feel if they knew you were competing in the Triwizard Tournament? Proud? Worried? Angry?”

Harry was feeling really annoyed now. How on earth was he to know how his parents would feel if they were alive? He could feel Rita Skeeter watching him very intently. Frowning, he avoided her gaze and looked down at words the quill had just written:

Tears fill those startlingly green eyes as our conversation turns to the parents he can barely remember.

“I have NOT got tears in my eyes!” said Harry loudly.

Before Rita Skeeter could say a word, the door of the broom cupboard was pulled open. Harry looked around, blinking in the bright light. Albus Dumbledore stood there, looking down at both of them, squashed into the cupboard.

“*Dumbledore!*” cried Rita Skeeter, with every appearance of delight — but Harry noticed that her quill and the parchment had suddenly vanished from the box of Magical Mess Remover, and Rita’s clawed fingers were hastily snapping shut the clasp of her crocodile-skin bag. “How are you?” she said, standing up and holding out one of her large, mannish hands to Dumbledore. “I hope you saw my piece over the summer about the International Confederation of Wizards’ Conference?”

“Enchantingly nasty,” said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. “I particularly enjoyed your description of me as an obsolete dingbat.”

Rita Skeeter didn’t look remotely abashed.

“I was just making the point that some of your ideas are a little old-fashioned, Dumbledore, and that many wizards in the street —”

“I will be delighted to hear the reasoning behind the rudeness, Rita,” said Dumbledore, with a courteous bow and a smile, “but I’m afraid we will have to discuss the matter later. The Weighing of the Wands is about to start, and it cannot take place if one of our champions is hidden in a broom cupboard.”

Very glad to get away from Rita Skeeter, Harry hurried back into the room. The other champions were now sitting in chairs near the door, and he sat down quickly next to Cedric, looking up at the velvet-covered table, where four of the five judges were now sitting — Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Mr. Crouch, and Ludo Bagman. Rita Skeeter settled herself down in a corner; Harry saw her slip the parchment out of her bag again, spread it on her knee, suck the end of the Quick-Quotes Quill, and place it once more on the parchment.

“May I introduce Mr. Ollivander?” said Dumbledore, taking his place at the judges’ table and talking to the champions. “He will be checking your wands to ensure that they are in good condition before the tournament.”

Harry looked around, and with a jolt of surprise saw an old wizard with large, pale eyes standing quietly by the window. Harry had met Mr. Ollivander before — he was the wandmaker from whom Harry had bought his own wand over three years ago in Diagon

Alley.

“Mademoiselle Delacour, could we have you first, please?” said Mr. Ollivander, stepping into the empty space in the middle of the room.

Fleur Delacour swept over to Mr. Ollivander and handed him her wand.

“Hmmm . . .” he said.

He twirled the wand between his long fingers like a baton and it emitted a number of pink and gold sparks. Then he held it close to his eyes and examined it carefully.

“Yes,” he said quietly, “nine and a half inches . . . inflexible . . . rosewood . . . and containing . . . dear me . . .”

“An ’air from ze ’ead of a veela,” said Fleur. “One of my grandmuzzer’s.”

So Fleur *was* part veela, thought Harry, making a mental note to tell Ron . . . then he remembered that Ron wasn’t speaking to him.

“Yes,” said Mr. Ollivander, “yes, I’ve never used veela hair myself, of course. I find it makes for rather temperamental wands . . . however, to each his own, and if this suits you . . .”

Mr. Ollivander ran his fingers along the wand, apparently checking for scratches or bumps; then he muttered, “*Orchideous!*” and a bunch of flowers burst from the wand-tip.

“Very well, very well, it’s in fine working order,” said Mr. Ollivander, scooping up the flowers and handing them to Fleur with her wand. “Mr. Diggory, you next.”

Fleur glided back to her seat, smiling at Cedric as he passed her.

“Ah, now, this is one of mine, isn’t it?” said Mr. Ollivander, with

much more enthusiasm, as Cedric handed over his wand. “Yes, I remember it well. Containing a single hair from the tail of a particularly fine male unicorn . . . must have been seventeen hands; nearly gored me with his horn after I plucked his tail. Twelve and a quarter inches . . . ash . . . pleasantly springy. It’s in fine condition. . . . You treat it regularly?”

“Polished it last night,” said Cedric, grinning.

Harry looked down at his own wand. He could see finger marks all over it. He gathered a fistful of robe from his knee and tried to rub it clean surreptitiously. Several gold sparks shot out of the end of it. Fleur Delacour gave him a very patronizing look, and he desisted.

Mr. Ollivander sent a stream of silver smoke rings across the room from the tip of Cedric’s wand, pronounced himself satisfied, and then said, “Mr. Krum, if you please.”

Viktor Krum got up and slouched, round-shouldered and duck-footed, toward Mr. Ollivander. He thrust out his wand and stood scowling, with his hands in the pockets of his robes.

“Hmm,” said Mr. Ollivander, “this is a Gregorovitch creation, unless I’m much mistaken? A fine wandmaker, though the styling is never quite what I . . . however . . .”

He lifted the wand and examined it minutely, turning it over and over before his eyes.

“Yes . . . hornbeam and dragon heartstring?” he shot at Krum, who nodded. “Rather thicker than one usually sees . . . quite rigid . . . ten and a quarter inches . . . *Avis!*”

The hornbeam wand let off a blast like a gun, and a number of small, twittering birds flew out of the end and through the open

window into the watery sunlight.

“Good,” said Mr. Ollivander, handing Krum back his wand. “Which leaves . . . Mr. Potter.”

Harry got to his feet and walked past Krum to Mr. Ollivander. He handed over his wand.

“Aaaah, yes,” said Mr. Ollivander, his pale eyes suddenly gleaming. “Yes, yes, yes. How well I remember.”

Harry could remember too. He could remember it as though it had happened yesterday. . . .

Four summers ago, on his eleventh birthday, he had entered Mr. Ollivander’s shop with Hagrid to buy a wand. Mr. Ollivander had taken his measurements and then started handing him wands to try. Harry had waved what felt like every wand in the shop, until at last he had found the one that suited him — this one, which was made of holly, eleven inches long, and contained a single feather from the tail of a phoenix. Mr. Ollivander had been very surprised that Harry had been so compatible with this wand. “Curious,” he had said, “curious,” and not until Harry asked what was curious had Mr. Ollivander explained that the phoenix feather in Harry’s wand had come from the same bird that had supplied the core of Lord Voldemort’s.

Harry had never shared this piece of information with anybody. He was very fond of his wand, and as far as he was concerned its relation to Voldemort’s wand was something it couldn’t help — rather as he couldn’t help being related to Aunt Petunia. However, he really hoped that Mr. Ollivander wasn’t about to tell the room about it. He had a funny feeling Rita Skeeter’s Quick-Quotes Quill might

just explode with excitement if he did.

Mr. Ollivander spent much longer examining Harry's wand than anyone else's. Eventually, however, he made a fountain of wine shoot out of it, and handed it back to Harry, announcing that it was still in perfect condition.

"Thank you all," said Dumbledore, standing up at the judges' table. "You may go back to your lessons now — or perhaps it would be quicker just to go down to dinner, as they are about to end —"

Feeling that at last something had gone right today, Harry got up to leave, but the man with the black camera jumped up and cleared his throat.

"Photos, Dumbledore, photos!" cried Bagman excitedly. "All the judges and champions, what do you think, Rita?"

"Er — yes, let's do those first," said Rita Skeeter, whose eyes were upon Harry again. "And then perhaps some individual shots."

The photographs took a long time. Madame Maxime cast everyone else into shadow wherever she stood, and the photographer couldn't stand far enough back to get her into the frame; eventually she had to sit while everyone else stood around her. Karkaroff kept twirling his goatee around his finger to give it an extra curl; Krum, whom Harry would have thought would have been used to this sort of thing, skulked, half-hidden, at the back of the group. The photographer seemed keenest to get Fleur at the front, but Rita Skeeter kept hurrying forward and dragging Harry into greater prominence. Then she insisted on separate shots of all the champions. At last, they were free to go.

Harry went down to dinner. Hermione wasn't there — he

supposed she was still in the hospital wing having her teeth fixed. He ate alone at the end of the table, then returned to Gryffindor Tower, thinking of all the extra work on Summoning Charms that he had to do. Up in the dormitory, he came across Ron.

“You’ve had an owl,” said Ron brusquely the moment he walked in. He was pointing at Harry’s pillow. The school barn owl was waiting for him there.

“Oh — right,” said Harry.

“And we’ve got to do our detentions tomorrow night, Snape’s dungeon,” said Ron.

He then walked straight out of the room, not looking at Harry. For a moment, Harry considered going after him — he wasn’t sure whether he wanted to talk to him or hit him, both seemed quite appealing — but the lure of Sirius’s answer was too strong. Harry strode over to the barn owl, took the letter off its leg, and unrolled it.

Harry —

I can’t say everything I would like to in a letter, it’s too risky in case the owl is intercepted — we need to talk face-to-face. Can you ensure that you are alone by the fire in Gryffindor Tower at one o’clock in the morning on the 22nd of November?

I know better than anyone that you can look after yourself, and while you’re around Dumbledore and Moody I don’t think anyone will be able to hurt you. However, someone seems to be having a good try. Entering you in that tournament would have been very

risky, especially right under Dumbledore's nose.

Be on the watch, Harry. I still want to hear about anything unusual. Let me know about the 22nd of November as quickly as you can.

Sirius

Die Onderzoek van die Towerstawe

Toe Harry daardie Sondagoggend wakker word, neem dit 'n rukkie voor hy onthou waarom hy so mistroostig en bekommerd voel. Toe spoel die herinneringe aan die vorige aand oor hom. Hy kom orent en pluk die gordyne om sy hemelbed oop met die bedoeling om met Ron te praat, om Ron te dwing om hom te glo – net om te sien dat Ron se bed leeg is; hy is duidelik reeds af vir ontbyt.

Harry trek aan en stap met die wenteltrap af geselskamer toe. Die oomblik toe hy instap, juig die mense wat reeds onbyt geëet het hom toe. Die vooruitsig om na die Groot Saal te gaan waar die res van die Griffindors hom soos 'n soort held gaan behandel, is nie aantreklik nie; dit is egter óf dit, óf hier bly waar die Creevey-broers, wat hom albei gretig nader wink, hom in 'n hoek gaan probeer vaskeer. Hy stap dus vasberade op die portretopening af, stoot dit oop, klim deur en bevind homself van aangesig tot aangesig met Hermien.

“Hallo,” sê sy en hou 'n stapel roosterbrood wat sy in 'n servet toegevou het, op. “Ek het dit vir jou gebring . . . Is jy lus om te gaan stap?”

“Goeie plan,” sê Harry dankbaar.

Hulle stap ondertoe, loop vinnig deur die Ingangsportaal sonder om by die Groot Saal in te kyk en stap spoedig oor die grasperk na waar Durmstrang se skip vasgemeer lê en 'n swart weerkaatsing op die water gooi. Dit is 'n koue oggend en hulle bly aan die beweeg terwyl hulle hul roosterbrood eet en Harry vir Hermien vertel wat gebeur het nadat hy die Griffindortafel die vorige aand verlaat het. Tot sy groot verligting aanvaar Hermien sy verhaal sonder om dit hoegenaamd in twyfel te trek.

“Wel, natuurlik het ek geweet jy't nie jouself ingeskryf nie,” sê sy nadat hy haar alles wat in die vertrek agter die Saal gebeur het, vertel het. “Jy moet jou gesig gesien het toe Dompeldorius jou naam uitgelees het! Die vraag is egter, wie het dit ingesit? Want Moodie is reg, Harry . . . Ek dink nie een van die studente sou dit kon doen nie . . . hulle sou die Beker nooit kon fop nie, of oor Dompeldorius se –”

“Het jy vir Ron gesien?” val Harry haar in die rede.

Hermien aarsel.

“H'm . . . ja . . . hy was onder vir ontbyt,” sê sy.

“Dink hy nog steeds dat ek myself ingeskryf het?”

“Wel . . . nee, ek dink nie so nie . . . nie regtig nie,” sê Hermien ongemaklik.

“Wat beteken dit miskien, nie regtig nie?”

“Ag, Harry, is dit nie duidelik nie?” sê Hermien wanhopig. “Hy’s jaloers!”

“Jaloers?” sê Harry ongelowig. “Jaloers waarop? Wil hy miskien ’n bobbejaan van homself staan en maak en dit voor die hele skool?”

“Kyk,” sê Hermien geduldig, “dis altyd jy wat al die aandag kry, jy weet hoe dit is. Ek weet dis nie jou skuld nie,” voeg sy vinnig by toe sy sien hoe Harry sy mond vererg oopmaak, “ek weet jy soek dit nie . . . maar – wel – jy sien, Ron het al daardie broers teen wie hy moet kompeteer en jy’s sy beste maat en jy’s regtig beroemd – hy word altyd eenkant toe gestoot sodra mense jou sien en hy vat dit maar net, hy praat nooit daaroor nie, maar ek dink dit is nou net een keer te veel . . .”

“Wonderlik,” sê Harry bitter. “Werklik wonderlik. Sê vir hom ek sê ek sal enige tyd met hom ruil. Net wanneer hy wil. Sê vir hom hy is welkom . . . mense staar na my voorkop net waar ek gaan . . .”

“Ek sê niks vir hom nie,” sê Hermien kortaf. “Sê self, dis die enigste manier om dit uit te sorteer.”

“Ek gaan nie agter hom aanhardloop en hom probeer kry om groot te word nie,” sê Harry so hard dat ’n hele paar uile in ’n boom daar naby verwilderd opvlieg. “Dalk sal hy glo dat dit nie so lekker is nie as ek eers my nek gebreek het, of –”

“Dis nie snaaks nie,” sê Hermien gedemp. “Dis glad nie snaaks nie.” Sy lyk uiters bekommerd. “Harry, ek het gedink – jy weet wat ons moet doen, of hoe? Dadelik, die oomblik dat ons terug by die kasteel is?”

“Ja, vir Ron ’n behoorlike skop op die –”

“Vir Sirius skryf. Jy moet vir hom sê wat gebeur het. Hy het gevra dat jy hom op hoogte moet hou van alles wat by Hogwarts gebeur . . . dis amper asof hy iets soos dié verwag het. Ek het perkament en ’n veerpen gebring –”

“Jy’s seker nie ernstig nie,” sê Harry terwyl hy rondkyk om te sien of iemand hulle kan hoor; maar die terrein is heeltemal verlate. “Hy het hiernatoe teruggekom net oor my litteken seer was. As ek vir hom moet sê dat iemand my vir die Drietowenaarstoernooi ingeskryf het, sal hy vir seker hier by die kasteel ingebars kom en –”

“Hy wil hê dat jy vir hom moet sê,” sê Hermien streng. “Hy gaan in elk geval uitvind –”

“Hoe?”

"Harry, dit kan nie stilgehou word nie," sê Hermien nou baie ernstig. Hierdie Toernooi is beroemd en jy is beroemd, ek sal baie verbaas wees as daar niks in die *Daaglikse Profeet* oor jou deelname is nie . . . Jy's alreeds in die helfte van die boeke oor Jy-Weet-Wie, weet jy . . . en Sirius sal dit eerder van jou wil hoor, ek weet hy sal."

"Oukei, oukei, ek sal vir hom skryf," sê Harry terwyl hy sy laaste stuk roosterbrood in die meer gooi. Hulle staan albei en kyk hoe dit vir 'n rukkie daar dryf voor 'n lang tentakel uit die water verrys en dit onder die oppervlak intrek. Toe gaan hulle terug kasteel toe.

"Wie se uil gaan ek gebruik?" sê Harry toe hulle die trappe uitklim. "Hy't gesê ek moenie weer vir Hedwig gebruik nie."

"Vra vir Ron of jy vir –"

"Ek vra Ron niks," sê Harry flouweg.

"Wel, leen dan een van die skool se uile, enigeeen mag hulle gebruik," sê Hermien.

Hulle gaan op na die Uilhuis toe. Hermien gee vir Harry 'n stuk perkament, 'n veerpen en 'n bottel ink en stap dan deur die lang rye dwarsstokke om na die verskillende uile te kyk terwyl Harry teen 'n muur gaan sit om sy brief te skryf.

Liewe Sirius

Jy het vir my gesê om jou te laat weet wat by Hogwarts aangaan, so hier is dit – ek weet nie of jy gehoor het nie, maar die Drietowenaars-toernooi word vanjaar gehou en ek is Saterdagandaas die vierde kampioen verkies. Ek weet nie wie my naam in die Beker Vol Vuur gesit het nie, want dit was nie ek nie. Die ander Hogwarts-kampioen is Cedric Diggory van Hoesenproes.

Toe hy hier kom, huiwer hy 'n oomblik om te dink. Hy is lus om iets te sê oor die groot benoude gevoel wat sedert die vorige aand swaar op sy bors lê, maar hy weet nie hoe om dit in woorde te stel nie, dus dompel hy sy veerpen bloot weer in die inkbottel en skryf:

Hoop jy's oukei en Bokbok ook – Harry.

"Klaar," sê hy vir Hermien toe hy opstaan en die strooi van sy kleed afborsel. Met dié fladder Hedwig af na sy skouer en hou haar been uit.

"Ek kan jou nie gebruik nie," sê Harry vir haar terwyl hy rondkyk op soek na 'n skooluil. "Ek moet een van hulle . . ."

Hedwig uiter 'n harde hoe-hoe en styg so vinnig op dat haar kloue in sy skouer sny. Toe Harry die brief aan 'n groot nonnetjiesuil se been vasmaak, hou sy haar rug op hom gedraai. Nadat die nonnetjiesuil weggevlieg het, steek Harry sy hand uit om vir Hedwig te streel, maar sy klik

haar snawel verontwaardig en vlieg tussen die dakbalke op tot bo, waar sy buite bereik is.

“Eers Ron en nou jy,” sê Harry vererg. *“Dis nie my skuld nie.”*

As Harry gedink het sake sal verbeter sodra almal aan die idee dat hy ook ’n kampioen is gewoon geraak het, bewys die volgende dag hom verkeerd. Toe die klasse eers weer begin, kan hy die res van die skool nie meer vermy nie – en dis duidelik dat die res van die skool, net soos Griffindor, reken dat Harry homself vir die Toernooi ingeskryf het. Anders as die Griffindors is hulle egter nie beïndruk nie.

Die Hoesenproesers wat gewoonlik uitstekend met die Griffindors oor die weg kom, is nou besonder koud teenoor almal van hulle. Een Herbo-logie-klas lewer genoeg bewys hiervan. Dit is duidelik dat die Hoesenproesers voel dat Harry hul kampioen se kalklig gesteel het; ’n gevoel wat waarskynlik vererger word deur die feit dat Huis Hoesenproes baie selde in die kalklig is en dat Cedric een van die weiniges is wat al vir enige glorie gesorg het toe hulle Griffindor een keer met Kwiddiek geklop het. Ernie Macmillan en Justin Finch-Fletchley met wie Harry normaalweg baie goed oor die weg kom, praat nie met hom nie, nie eens toe hulle Bonsende Bolle uit dieselfde plantkissie moet oorplant nie – hoewel hulle baie onaangenaam lag toe een van die Bonsende Bolle uit Harry se greep wriemel en hom hard deur die gesig raps. Ron praat ook nie met Harry nie. Hermien sit tussen hulle en gesels geforseerd, maar hoewel hulle haar gewoonweg antwoord, maak hulle nie met mekaar oogkontak nie. Dit voel vir Harry asof selfs professor Spruit terughoudend teenoor hom is – maar sy is na alles Huis Hoesenproes se hoof.

Onder normale omstandighede sou hy daarna uitgesien het om vir Hagrid te sien, maar Versorging van Magiese Kreature beteken dat die Slibberins ook daar is – die eerste keer dat hy van aangesig tot aangesig met hulle sal kom sedert hy kampioen geword het.

Soos Harry verwag het, daag Malfoy met sy bekende grynslag by Hagrid se hut op.

“A, kyk, manne, hier’s die kampioen,” sê hy vir Krabbe en Goliat die oomblik toe hy binne hooraftand van Harry is. “Het julle jul handtekeningboekies? Kry maar gou daardie handtekening, want ek twyfel of hy nog baie langer in die rondte gaan wees . . . die helfte van die Drietowenaarskampioene is dood . . . hoe lank dink jy gaan jy hou, Potter? Ek wed nie langer as die eerste tien minute van die eerste taak nie.”

Krabbe en Goliat grinnik kruiperig, maar Malfoy moet nou stilbly, want Hagrid kom uit sy hut met ’n wankelende toring kratte. In elke krat is ’n baie groot Sputstertkrewel. Tot die klas se konsternasie verduidelik Hagrid dat die Krewels mekaar doodmaak omdat hulle te veel opgekropte energie het. Dit sal opgelos word indien elkeen in die klas ’n leiband

om 'n Krewel bind en 'n entjie met hom gaan stap. Die enigste goeie ding aan hierdie plan is dat dit Malfoy se aandag aftrek.

“Met hierdie ding gaan stap?” herhaal hy gewalg terwyl hy in een van die kratte kyk. “En presies waar moet ons die leiband nogal vasmaak? Om die angel, die spuitkant of die suier?”

“Om die middel,” sê Hagrid en wys hulle. “H'm – dit sal dalk nodig wees om jul draakvelhandskoene aan te trek, net as 'n ekstra voorsorgmaatreël. Harry – kom hier en help my met hierdie grote . . .”

Hagrid se eintlike plan is egter om eenkant, weg van die klas, met Harry te praat.

Hy wag tot al die ander met hul Krewels padgegee het, toe draai hy na Harry en sê baie ernstig, “Jy – neem dus deel, Harry. Aan die Toernooi. Skoolkampioen.”

“Een van die kampioene,” help Harry hom reg.

Hagrid se kewerswart oë lyk baie angstig onder sy wilde wenkbroue. “'nige idee wie jou ingeskryf het, Harry?”

“Dan glo jy dat ek dit nie gedoen het nie?” sê Harry, wat die opwelling van dankbaarheid wat hy met hierdie woorde van Hagrid ervaar met moeite wegsteek.

“Tuurlik glo ek dit,” grom Hagrid. “Jy't gesê dit was nie jy nie en ek glo jou – en Dompeldorius glo jou ook en alles.”

“Wens ek het geweet wie dit was,” sê Harry bitter.

Die tweestuks staar oor die grasperk; die klas lê gesaai oor die terrein en die laaste een is in die moeilikheid. Die Krewels is reeds meer as 'n meter lank en is geweldig sterk. Hulle is glad nie meer doploos en kleurloos nie; hulle het 'n soort dik, grys, blink pantser ontwikkel. Hulle lyk soos 'n kruis tussen reuseskerpioene en langerige krappe – maar nog steeds sonder herkenbare koppe of oë. Hulle is geweldig sterk en moeilik beheerbaar.

“Lyk asof hulle pret het, nè?” sê Hagrid in sy noppies. Harry aanvaar dat hy na die Krewels verwys, want sy klasmaats het beslis nie pret nie; elke nou en dan, met 'n ontstellende boem, ontplof die punt van een van die Krewels sodat dit 'n hele paar meter vorentoe skiet. Meer as een student word op die maag oor die grond gesleep sodat hulle moet sukkel om weer regop te kom.

“Ag, ek weet nie, Harry,” sug Hagrid skielik en weer kyk hy met 'n bekommerde uitdrukking op sy gesig na hom. “Skoolkampioen . . . alles gebeur ook met jou, nie waar nie?”

Harry antwoord nie. Ja, alles gebeur beslis met hom . . . dit was min of meer wat Hermien gesê het toe hulle langs die meer gaan stap het, en volgens haar is dit die rede waarom Ron nie meer met hom praat nie.

Die volgende paar dae is die ergste wat Harry by Hogwarts beleef het. Die

naaste wat hy al hieraan gekom het, was tydens daardie maande in sy tweede jaar toe 'n groot deel van die skool geglo het dat hy van sy medestudente aangeval het. Toe was Ron egter aan sy kant. Hy dink dat hy die res van die skool se houding sou kon verwerk as hy net weer vir Ron as 'n vriend kon hê, maar hy gaan nie vir Ron probeer oortuig om met hom te praat as Ron nie wil nie. Hy voel egter bitter alleen, veral met al die afkeer wat hy van alle kante af ervaar.

Hy kan die Hoesenproesers se houding verstaan, selfs al is dit nie lekker nie; hulle het hul eie kampioen wat hulle moet ondersteun. Hy het niks anders as giftige beledigings van die Slibberins verwag nie – hy is hoogs ongewild onder hulle, was nog altyd; hy het Griffindor al te veel kere gehelp om hulle te klop, sowel in Kwiddiek as in die Interhuis-kampioenskappe. Hy het egter gehoop dat die Raweklouers vir hom sowel as vir Cedric sal ondersteun. Hiermee was hy verkeerd. Dit lyk asof die meeste Raweklouers dink dat hy so gretig is om nog meer roem te verwerf dat hy die Beker gekul het om sy naam te aanvaar.

Dan is daar die feit dat Cedric soveel meer na 'n kampioen as hy lyk. Met sy reguit neus, donker hare en grys oë is hy buitengewoon aantreklik, en dit is moeilik om te sê wie deesdae meer bewonder word, Cedric of Viktor Krum. Tydens een middagete sien Harry hoe dieselfde sesdejaarmsies wat so gretig was om Krum se handtekening te kry, vir Cedric smeek om hul skoolsakke te teken.

Intussen het Sirius nog nie geantwoord nie, Hedwig weier om naby hom te kom, professor Trelawney voorspel sy dood met veel meer sekerheid as gewoonlik en hy vaar so sleg met die Ontbiedtowerspreuke in professor Flickerpitt se klas dat hy ekstra huiswerk kry – die enigste persoon buiten Neville.

“Dis regtig nie so moeilik nie, Harry,” probeer Hermien hom moed inpraat toe hulle by Flickerpitt se klas uitstap – die hele les lank het sy voorwerpe in die vertrek na haar laat kom asof sy die een of ander vreemde soort magneet vir bordwissers, snippermandjies en Lunaskope is. “Jy het net nie behoorlik gekonsentreer nie –”

“Wonder hoekom?” sê Harry grimmig toe Cedric Diggory verbystap, omring deur 'n groot groep giggelende meisies wat almal na Harry kyk asof hy 'n besonder groot Spuistertkrewel is. “Wel – wat maak dit tog saak. Dubbele Towerdrankies later vanmiddag om na uit te sien . . .”

Dubbele Towerdrankies is altyd 'n aaklige ervaring, maar deesdae is dit suiwer marteling. Om vir 'n uur en 'n half in 'n kerker opgesluit te wees met Snerp en die Slibberins wat hulle daarop toelê om Harry so erg moontlik te straf omdat hy dit gewaag het om skoolkampioen te word, is net mooi die onplesierigste ding wat Harry hom ooit sou kon voorstel. Hy is reeds deur een hele Vrydag hiervan met Hermien wat langs hom sit en “Ignoreer hulle, ignoreer hulle, ignoreer hulle” binnensmonds prewel,

En daar is geen rede hoekom dit vandag enigsins beter gaan wees nie.

Toe hy en Hermien na middage by Snerp se kerker kom, wag die Slibberins reeds buite, elkeen van hulle met 'n groot wapen voor op die kleed. Vir een wilde oomblik dink Harry dat dit S.P.O.E.G.-knopies is – toe sien hy dat almal dieselfde boodskap op het, in glimmende rooi letters wat helder in die dofverligte ondergrondse gang skyn:

Ondersteun CEDRIC DIGGORY –
Hogwarts se WARE kampioen!

“Hou jy daarvan, Potter?” sê Malfoy hard toe Harry nader kom. “Dis nog nie al nie – kyk!”

Hy druk die wapen teen sy bors vas en die boodskap verander en word deur 'n nuwe, glimmende groene vervang:

POTTER STINK

Die Slibberins skreeu van die lag. Elkeen van hulle druk ook teen hul wapens tot die boodskap *POTTER STINK* helder reg rondom Harry gloei. Hy voel hoe die warmte in sy gesig en nek opstyg.

“O, baie snaaks,” sê Hermien sarkasties vir Pansy Parkinson en haar kliek van Slibberin-meisies wat harder as al die ander lag, “regtig humoristies.”

Ron staan teen die muur by Dean en Septimus. Hy lag nie, maar kom ook nie vir Harry op nie.

“Wil jy een hê, La Grange?” sê Malfoy terwyl hy 'n wapen na Hermien toe uithou. “Ek het stapels. Moet net nie nou aan my hand raak nie. Ek het dit nou net gewas, sien, wil nie 'n Modderbloed se slym daarop hê nie.”

'n Gedeelte van die woede wat reeds dae lank in Harry opwel, bars soos 'n dam water deur sy borskas. Voor hy mooi weet wat hy doen, het hy sy towerstaf uitgepluk. Om hom skarrel mense uit die pad en af in die gang.

“Harry!” sê Hermien waarskuwend.

“Toe, Potter,” sê Malfoy bedaard terwyl hy ook sy towerstaf uithaal. “Moodie is nie nou hier om jou op te pas nie – doen dit, as jy die moed het –”

Vir 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde kyk hulle mekaar in die oë en toe, op presies dieselfde oomblik, gaan albei oor tot aksie.

“Furnunculus!” gil Harry.

“Densaugeo!” krys Malfoy.

Ligstrale skiet uit al twee towerstawwe, tref mekaar in die lug en skram weg – Harry s'n tref vir Goliat in die gesig en Malfoy s'n tref vir

Hermien. Goliat bulk en gryp met albei hande na sy neus wat in aaklige, groot swere uitgebars het – Hermien kerm paniekbevange en gryp na haar mond.

“Hermien!” Ron storm haastig nader om te sien wat gebeur het.

Harry draai om en sien hoe Ron Hermien se hand van haar gesig aftrek. Dit lyk glad nie goed nie. Hermien se voortande – wat reeds groter as normaal is – is besig om teen ’n geweldige tempo te groei; sy lyk al meer soos ’n bewer hoe langer haar tande word. Hulle trek reeds verby haar onderlip op pad na haar ken toe. Sy vat-vat daaraan en uiter ’n verskrikte, paniekbevange kreet.

“Wat is die rede vir hierdie kabaal?” vra ’n sagte en dodelike stem. Snerp het opgedaag.

Die Slibberins begin raserig verduidelik. Snerp wys met ’n lang geel vinger na Malfoy en sê, “Verduidelik.”

“Potter het my aangeval, meneer –”

“Ons het mekaar op dieselfde oomblik aangeval!” skree Harry.

“– en hy’t vir Goliat getref – kyk –”

Snerp kyk ondersoekend na Goliat, wie se gesig nou lyk soos iets wat in ’n boek oor giftige paddastoele tuis hoort.

“Siekeboeg, Goliat,” sê Snerp bedaard.

“Malfoy het vir Hermien getref!” sê Ron. “Kyk!”

Hy dwing Hermien om vir Snerp haar tande te wys – sy doen haar bes om hulle agter haar hande weg te steek, maar dit is onmoontlik; hulle het al tot onder by haar kraag gegroei. Pansy Parkinson en die ander Slibberin-meisies is dubbeld gevou van die lag en wys agter Snerp se rug na Hermien.

Snerp staar kil na Hermien en toe sê hy, “Ek sien geen verskil nie.”

Hermien los ’n klein gillettjie; haar oë skiet vol trane, sy draai op haar hakke om en hardloop die hele ent pad op in die gang tot sy uit sig verdwyn.

Dit is seker ’n geluk dat sowel Harry as Ron tegelykertyd op Snerp begin skree het en dat hul stemme so erg in die klipgang weergalm, want in die verwarring is dit vir hom onmoontlik om te hoor presies wat hulle op hom skree. Hy kry egter die boodskap.

“Laat ek sien,” sê hy op sy slymerigste manier. “Vyftig punte van Grifindor af en detensie vir sowel Potter as Weasley. Toe-toe, gaan in, of dis ’n week se detensie.”

Harry se ore tuit. Die onregverdigheid van alles maak dat hy Snerp in ’n duisend slymerige stukkies wil vervloek. Hy stap verby Snerp en loop saam met Ron tot agter in die kerker waar hy sy sak op die tafel neergooi. Ook Ron bewe van woede – vir ’n oomblik lyk dit asof alles tussen hulle weer soos gewoonlik is, maar dan draai Ron om en gaan sit by Dean en Septimus sodat Harry alleen by sy tafel is. Aan die ander kant van die

kerker draai Malfoy sy rug op Snerp en druk grinnikend teen sy wapen. Die woorde **POTTER STINK** flits weer eens deur die vertrek.

Toe die les begin, sit Harry na Snerp en gluur en dink aan al die aaklige dinge wat met hom kan gebeur . . . as hy net kon weet hoe om die Cruciatus-vloek te doen . . . kon hy Snerp op die naat van sy rug laat lê het, nes daardie spinnekop, rukkend en bewend . . .

"Teenmiddels!" sê Snerp en toe hy na hulle kyk, glinster sy koue, swart oë onplesierig. "Teen hierdie tyd moet julle al jul resepte voorberei het. Julle moet dit met sorg berei, waarna ons iemand sal kies om een op uit te toets . . ."

Snerp se oë ontmoet Harry s'n en Harry weet wat op hom wag. Snerp gaan hom vergiftig. Harry sien in sy geestesoog hoe hy sy hekseketel optel, tot voor in die klas hardloop en dit oor Snerp se oliegerige kop omkeer –

Net toe onderbreek 'n geklop aan die kerker se deur Harry se gedagtes.

Dit is Colin Creevey; hy glip by die vertrek in, glimlag stralend vir Harry en stap na Snerp se lessenaar voor in die vertrek.

"Ja?" sê Snerp kortaf.

"Ekskuus, meneer, maar ek moet vir Harry Potter boontoe neem."

Snerp gluur langs sy haakneus af na Colin, wie se gretige glimlag vin-nig vervaag.

"Potter het nog 'n uur van Towerdrankies oor," sê Snerp kil. "Hy sal boontoe kom sodra die les klaar is."

Colin word pienk.

"Meneer – meneer, mnr. Bagman wil hom hê," sê hy senuagtig. "Al die kampioene moet gaan, ek dink hulle wil foto's neem . . ."

Harry sou enigiets gee om te keer dat Colin hierdie laaste paar woorde sê. Hy waag dit om so effens na Ron te loer, maar Ron staar gedetermineerd na die plafon.

"Goed, goed," snou Snerp. "Potter, los jou goed hier, ek wil jou later terughê om jou teenmiddel te toets."

"Jammer, meneer – maar hy moet sy goed saamneem," piep Colin. "Al die kampioene –"

"Goed *dan!*" sê Snerp. "Potter – vat jou sak en maak dat jy wegkom!"

Harry swaai sy sak oor sy skouer, staan op en sit af deur toe. Toe hy verby die Slibberins se lessenaars stap, flits **POTTER STINK** van alle kante voor hom.

"Dis ongelooflik, is dit nie, Harry?" sê Colin, wat begin praat het die oomblik dat Harry die kerker se deur agter hom toegemaak het. "Is dit nie? Om te dink dat jy 'n kampioen is!"

"Ja, dis regtig ongelooflik," sê Harry swaar terwyl hulle na die trappe by die Ingangsportaal stap. "Waarvoor wil hulle die foto's hê, Colin?"

"Vir die *Daaglikse Profeet*, dink ek!"

“Wonderlik,” sê Harry stroef. “Net wat ek nodig het. Nog meer publisiteit.”

“Sterkte!” sê Colin toe hulle by die regte vertrek kom. Harry klop aan die deur en gaan in.

Hy bevind hom in ’n redelike klein klaskamer; die meeste van die lessenaars is tot agter in die vertrek gestoot sodat daar ’n groot ruimte in die middel is; drie van hulle staan egter kop aan kop voor die skryfbord en ’n lang stuk ferweel is daaroor gegooi. Vyf stoele staan agter die ferweel-bedekte lessenaars en Ludo Bagman sit op een van hulle en gesels met ’n heks wat Harry nog nooit tevore gesien het nie en wat ’n persrooi kleed aanhet.

Viktor Krum staan soos altyd buierig in ’n hoek en praat met niemand nie. Cedric en Fleur is in gesprek. Fleur lyk baie gelukkiger as wat Harry haar tot dusver nog gesien het; sy gooi haar kop gedurig terug sodat haar lang silwer hare die lig vang. ’n Man met ’n groot maag wat ’n yslike kamera vashou wat effens rook, loer uit die hoek van sy oog na Fleur.

Dan sien Bagman skielik vir Harry, staan vinnig op en kom nader. “A, hier is hy! Kampioen nommer vier! In is jy, Harry, in is jy . . . niks om jou oor te bekommer nie, dis bloot die seremonie vir die Ondersoek van die Towerstawwe, die res van die beoordelaars sal enige oomblik hier wees –”

“Die Ondersoek van die Towerstawwe?” herhaal Harry senuagtig.

“Ons moet seker maak dat jul towerstawwe behoorlik werk, geen probleme het nie, jy sien, aangesien hulle jul belangrikste wapens is in die take wat voorlê,” sê Bagman. “Die kundige is daar bo by Dompeldorius. Dan is daar ook nog ’n klein fotosessie. Dit is Rika Skinner,” voeg hy by en beduie na die heks in die persrooi kleed, “sy doen ’n klein beriggie oor die Toernooi vir die *Daaglikse Profeet* . . .”

“Miskien nie heeltemal so klein nie, Ludo,” sê Rika en haar oë rus op Harry.

Haar hare is gedoen in oordadige, eienaardige stywe krulle wat glad nie by haar swaar kakebeen pas nie. Sy dra ’n bril wat met juwele versier is. Die dik vingers wat haar krokodilvelhandsak vashou, eindig in vyf sentimeter lange vingernaels wat karmosynrooi geverf is.

“Ek wonder of ek ’n woordjie met Harry kan wissel voor ons begin?” sê sy vir Bagman terwyl sy steeds stip na Harry staar. “Die jongste kampioen, weet jy . . . om ’n bietjie kleur te verleen.”

“Sekerlik!” roep Bagman uit. “Dit is – mits Harry nie besware het nie?” “E –” sê Harry.

“Pragtig,” sê Rika Skinner en ’n oomblik later pak haar skarlakenrooi kloue Harry se boarm in ’n verbasend sterk greep beet. Sy stuur hom uit die vertrek en maak ’n deur daar naby oop.

“Ons wil tog nie daardie geraas hoor nie,” sê sy. “Laat ek sien . . . a, ja, dis heerlik knus.”

Dit is 'n besemkas. Harry gaap haar aan.

"Kom in, skat – dis reg – pragtig," sê Rika Skinner weer en gaan sit ongemaklik op 'n omgedopte emmer terwyl sy Harry op 'n karton-doos platdruk en die deur toestoot sodat hulle in die donker is. "Laat ek sien . . ."

Sy maak haar krokodilvelhandsak oop en haal 'n hand vol kerse uit wat sy met 'n wuif van haar towerstaf aan die brand steek en op toweragtige wyse in die lug laat hang sodat hulle kan sien wat om hulle aan-gaan.

"Jy gee nie om as ek 'n Kitskrabbelveerpen gebruik nie, Harry? Dit gee my die geleentheid om normaalweg met jou te praat . . ."

"n Wat?" sê Harry.

Rika Skinner se glimlag verbreed. Harry sien drie goue tande. Sy steek haar hand opnuut in haar krokodilvelhandsak en haal 'n lang skelgroen veerpen en 'n rol perkament uit wat sy tussen hulle op 'n krat vol van Mev. Schuur se Veeldoelige Magiese Skoonmaakmiddels oopvou. Sy steek die punt van die groen veerpen in haar mond, suig vir 'n oomblik behaaglik daaraan en sit dit dan op die perkament neer waar dit regop op sy punt gebalanseer bly staan terwyl dit liggies beef.

"Toets . . . dit is Rika Skinner, verslaggewer by die *Daaglikse Profeet*."

Harry loer vinnig af na die veerpen. Die oomblik dat Rika Skinner begin praat het, het die groen veerpen al skuiwend oor die perkament begin skryf:

Aantreklike blonde Rika Skinner, drie-en-veertig jaar oud, wie se genadelose veerpen reeds talle geswolle opgeblase reputasies geprik –

"Pragtig," sê Rika Skinner weer terwyl sy die boonste gedeelte van die perkament afskeur, opfrommel en in haar handsak prop. Dan leun sy nader aan Harry en sê, "Sê my, Harry . . . wat het jou laat besluit om aan die Drietowenaarstoernooi deel te neem?"

"E –" begin Harry weer, maar die veerpen trek sy aandag af. Hoewel hy nie 'n woord sê nie, dartel dit oor die perkament en hy kan 'n nuwe sin lees:

'n Lelike litteken, aandenking van 'n tragiese verlede, skend die andersins sjarmante gesig van Harry Potter, wie se oë –

"Ignoreer die veerpen, Harry," sê Rika Skinner ferm. Onwillig kyk Harry na haar. "Nou – hoekom het jy besluit om vir die Toernooi in te skryf, Harry?"

"Ek het nie," sê Harry. "Ek weet nie hoe my naam in die Beker Vol Vuur beland het nie. Ek het dit nie daarin gesit nie."

Rika Skinner lig een swaar ingetekende wenkbrou. "Komaan, Harry, dis nie nodig om bang te wees dat jy in die moeilikheid gaan beland nie. Ons weet almal dat jy nie eintlik moes ingeskryf het nie. Moet jou nie daaroor bekommer nie. My lesers is rasend oor 'n rebel."

"Maar ek het nie ingeskryf nie," herhaal Harry. "Ek weet nie wie –"

"Hoe voel jy oor die take wat op jou wag?" sê Rika Skinner. "Opgewonde? Senuagtig?"

"Ek het nog nie eintlik daaroor gedink nie . . . ja, seker senuagtig," sê Harry. Sy binnegoed draai ongemaklik terwyl hy praat.

"Kampioene het in die verlede gesterf, weet jy!" sê Rika Skinner flink. "Het jy al daaraan gedink?"

"Wel . . . hulle sê dit gaan vanjaar baie veiliger wees," sê Harry.

Die veerpen skarrel oor die perkament tussen hulle, heen en weer, asof dit skaats.

"Jy het die dood natuurlik al tevore in die gesig gestaar, of hoe?" sê Rika Skinner terwyl sy hom stip dophou. "Hoe sal jy sê het dit jou beïnvloed?"

"E – ," sê Harry weer.

"Dink jy die trauma in jou verlede maak jou gretig om jouself te bewys? Om aan die verwagtinge van jou naam te voldoen? Sou jy sê dat jy miskien in die versoeking gekom het om aan die Toernooi deel te neem omdat –"

"Ek het nie ingeskryf nie," sê Harry, wat nou geïrriteerd raak.

"Kan jy jou ouers hoegenaamd onthou?" praat Rika Skinner hom dood.

"Nee," sê Harry.

"Hoe dink jy sou hulle gevoel het as hulle kon weet dat jy aan die Drietowenaarstoernooi gaan deelneem? Trots? Bekommerd? Kwaad?"

Nou is Harry regtig omgekrap. Hoe op aarde moet hy weet hoe sy ouers sou gevoel het as hulle nog gelewe het? Hy kom agter dat Rika Skinner hom baie intens dophou. Hy frons, vermy haar blik en kyk af na die woorde wat die veerpen so pas geskryf het.

Trane vul daardie ongewone groen oë toe ons oor die ouers wat hy skaars kan onthou, begin praat.

"Daar is NIE trane in my oë nie!" sê Harry hard.

Voor Rika Skinner 'n woord kan sê, gaan die besemkas se deur oop. Harry kyk om en knipper sy oë teen die helder lig. Albus Dompeldorius staan daar. Hy kyk af op die twee wat saamgedruk in die besemkas sit.

"Dompeldorius!" roep Rika Skinner met 'n skyn van plesier – maar Harry merk dat haar veerpen en die perkament skielik van die krat vol Magiese Skoonmaakmiddels verdwyn het en dat Rika se klouagtige vin-

gers haar krokodilvelhandsak vinnig toeklap. "Hoe gaan dit?" sê sy terwyl sy opstaan en een van haar groot, manlike hande na Dompeldorius toe uithou. "Ek hoop jy het my berig laas somer oor die Konferensie van die Internasionale Konfederasie vir Towenaars gesien?"

"Betowerend geniëpsig," sê Dompeldorius en sy oë vonkel. "Ek het jou beskrywing van my as 'n uitgediende ou fossiel besonder geniet."

Rika Skinner lyk nie in die minste verleë nie. "Ek het bloot die punt gemaak dat sommige van jou idees ietwat verouderd is, Dompeldorius, en dat baie towenaars op straat —"

"Ek sal werklik graag die argumente agter die onbeskofthede wil hoor, Rika," sê Dompeldorius met 'n hoflike buiging en 'n glimlag, "maar ek is bevrees dat ons die aangeleentheid later sal moet bespreek. Die Onderzoek van die Towerstawwe moet begin en dit kan nie gebeur terwyl een van ons kampioene in 'n besemkas versteek is nie."

Harry is baie verlig om uit Rika Skinner se kloue te ontsnap en hy gaan haastig terug na die vertrek. Die ander kampioene sit reeds in stoele by die deur. Hy gaan sit vinnig langs Cedric en kyk op na die ferweelbedekte tafel waar vier van die vyf beoordelaars reeds sit — professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxine, mnr. Crouch en Ludo Bagman. Rika Skinner maak haarself in 'n hoek tuis; Harry sien hoe sy die perkament uit haar handsak haal en op haar knie oopvou, die punt van die Kitskrabbelveerpen suig en dit weer eens op die perkament neersit.

"Mag ek mnr. Ollivander aan julle voorstel?" sê Dompeldorius terwyl hy sy plek aan die beoordelaarstafel inneem en met die kampioene praat. "Hy sal jul towerstawwe nagaan om seker te maak dat hulle in 'n goeie toestand is voor die Toernooi begin."

Harry kyk om en sien met 'n skok van verbasing 'n ou towenaar met groot, bleek oë wat stil voor die venster staan. Harry het mnr. Ollivander al tevore ontmoet — hy is die towerstafmaker by wie Harry sy eie towerstaf meer as drie jaar gelede in Diagonaalstraat gekoop het.

"Mademoiselle Delacour, sal jy asseblief eerste vorentoe kom?" sê mnr. Ollivander terwyl hy na die oop ruimte in die middel van die vertrek stap.

Fleur Delacour beweeg oor na mnr. Ollivander toe en gee haar towerstaf vir hom aan.

"Hmmm . . ." sê hy.

Hy draai die towerstaf soos 'n dirigeerstokkie tussen sy lang vingers rond en 'n aantal pienk en goue vonke spat daaruit. Toe hou hy dit baie na aan sy oë en ondersoek dit behoorlik.

"Ja," sê hy sag, "twee-en-twintig sentimeter . . . onbuigbaar . . . rooshout . . . en bevat . . . o, liewe . . ."

"'n Haar van die kop van 'n Veela," sê Fleur. "Een van my oumas s'n."

Dan is Fleur half-Veela, dink Harry terwyl hy 'n knoop in sy gedagtes

maak om vir Ron te sê . . . voor hy onthou dat Ron nie met hom praat nie.

“Ja,” sê mnr. Ollivander, “ja, ek het self natuurlik nog nooit Veela-hare gebruik nie. Ek vind dit lei tot temperamentele reaksies in ’n towerstaf . . . hoewel elkeen self moet besluit en as dit jou pas . . .”

Mnr. Ollivander streel met sy vingers oor die towerstaf, skynbaar op soek na krapmerke of knoppe; dan mompel hy, “*Orchideus!*” en ’n bos blomme bars uit die towerstaf se punt.

“Wel, wel, dis in ’n goeie werkende toestand,” sê mnr. Ollivander toe hy die blomme bymekaarvat en saam met haar towerstaf vir Fleur aangee. “Mnr. Diggory, jy is volgende.”

Fleur sweef terug na haar sitplek en glimlag vir Cedric toe hy verby haar stap.

“A, hierdie is een van myne, nè?” sê mnr. Ollivander met heelwat meer entoesiasme toe Cedric sy towerstaf vir hom aangee. “Ja, ek onthou dit goed. Bevat ’n enkele haar uit die stert van ’n werklik besondere manlike eenhoring . . . was ten minste sewentien hande hoog; het my amper met sy horing deurboor toe ek dit uit sy stert gepluk het. Sewe-en-twintig sentimeter . . . essehout . . . lekker veerkragtig. In ’n uitstekende toestand . . . jy behandel die hout gereeld?”

“Het dit gisteraand gepoleer,” sê Cedric en grinnik.

Harry kyk af na sy eie towerstaf. Daar is oral vingermerke op. Hy vat ’n vuis vol van sy kleed bymekaar en probeer om dit ongemerk skoon te vryf. Verskeie goue vonke spat uit die punt. Fleur Delacour kyk so neerbuigend na hom dat hy daar en dan ophou.

Mnr. Ollivander stuur ’n reeks silwer rookkringetjies uit die punt van Cedric se towerstaf, kondig aan dat hy tevrede is en sê, “Mnr. Krum, asseblief.”

Viktor Krum kom orent en slof vooroorgebuig met ronde skouers na mnr. Ollivander toe. Hy hou sy towerstaf uit en trap fronsend rond met sy hande diep in sy kleed se sakke gedruk.

“Hmm,” sê mnr. Ollivander, “’n Gregorovitch-skepping, tensy ek ’n fout maak? ’n Uitstekende towerstafmaker, hoewel die stiling nie heeltemal is wat ek . . . in elk geval . . .”

Hy lig die towerstaf en bestudeer dit sorgvuldig terwyl hy dit om en om voor sy oë draai.

“Ja . . . booghout en die hartsnaar van ’n draak?” vra hy vir Krum, wat knik. “Ietwat dikker as wat ’n mens normaalweg sien . . . redelik onbuigbaar . . . twee-en-twintig sentimeter . . . Avis!”

Die booghout-towerstaf maak ’n knal soos ’n geweer en ’n paar klein, kwetterende voëltjies vlieg uit die punt en deur die oop venster tot in die waterige sonlig daar buite.

“Goed,” sê mnr. Ollivander toe hy die towerstaf vir Krum teruggee. “Nou nog net . . . mnr. Potter.”

Harry staan op en stap verby Krum tot by mnr. Ollivander. Hy oorhandig sy towerstaf.

“Aaa, ja,” sê mnr. Ollivander en sy bleek oë glinster skielik. “Ja, ja, ja, hoe goed onthou ek dit nie.”

Harry onthou dit ook. Hy onthou dit asof dit net gister gebeur het . . .

Vier somers gelede, op sy elfde verjaardag, het hy saam met Hagrid by mnr. Ollivander se winkel ingestap om ’n towerstaf te koop. Mnr. Ollivander het al sy mates geneem en toe towerstawwe wat hy moet toets vir hom begin aangee. Dit het vir Harry gevoel asof hy elke towerstaf in die winkel geswaai het, tot hy die een wat hom pas uiteindelik gekry het – hierdie een, hulshout, sewe-en-twintig sentimeter lank en met een enkele veer van die stert van ’n feniks in die kern. Mnr. Ollivander was baie verbaas toe Harry so goed by hierdie towerstaf pas. “Vreemd,” het hy gesê, “. . . baie vreemd,” en dit was eers nadat Harry gevra het wat so vreemd is dat mnr. Ollivander verduidelik het dat die feniksveer in Harry se towerstaf van dieselfde voël kom wat die kern van die heer Woldemort se towerstaf voorsien het.

Harry het hierdie stukkie inligting nog met niemand gedeel nie. Hy is baie erg oor sy towerstaf en wat hom betref, is dit nie die towerstaf se skuld dat hy aan die heer Woldemort s’n verwant is nie – net soos hy nie kan help dat hy van tant Petunia familie is nie. Hy hoop egter dat mnr. Ollivander dit nie vir almal in die vertrek gaan sê nie. Hy het ’n snaakse gevoel dat Rika Skinner se Kitskrabbelveerpen sal oopbars van opgewondenheid as hy dit sou doen.

Mnr. Ollivander spandeer baie meer tyd aan Harry se towerstaf as aan enigiemand anders s’n. Uiteindelik laat hy ’n fontein van wyn daaruit spuit en gee dit aan Harry terug met die woorde dat dit in ’n uitstekende toestand is.

“Dankie aan almal van julle,” sê Dompeldorius toe hy van die beoordelaarstaf af opstaan. “Julle kan teruggaan klas toe – of dalk sal dit beter wees as julle afgaan vir aandete, siende dat die klasse amper klaar is –”

Hierdie woorde laat Harry voel dat iets tog vandag uiteindelik reg loop, maar net toe hy opstaan, spring die man met die swart kamera orent en maak sy keel skoon.

“Foto’s, Dompeldorius, foto’s!” roep Bagman uitgelate uit. “Al die beoordelaars en kampioene. Wat sê jy, Rika?”

“H’m – ja, kom ons neem daardies eerste,” sê Rika Skinner wie se oë al weer op Harry rus. “En dan dalk ’n paar individuele foto’s.”

Die fotosessie neem ’n hele ruk. Madame Maxine oorskadu almal, waar sy ook al staan, en die fotograaf kan nie ver genoeg terugstaan om haar ook in die raam te kry nie; uiteindelik moet sy gaan sit terwyl al die

ander om haar staan. Karkaroff hou aan om sy bokbaardjie vir ekstra krul om 'n vinger te draai; Krum, wat Harry gedink het aan hierdie soort ding gewoon moet wees, staan dikmond, half weggesteek, agter die groep. Die fotograaf is besonder gretig om Fleur voor te laat staan terwyl Rika Skinner aanhoudend vorentoe storm om Harry voor in te druk. Daarna dring sy aan op individuele foto's van al die kampioene. Uiteindelik kan hulle gaan.

Harry gaan ondertoe vir aandete. Hermien is nie daar nie – sy is seker nog in die siekeboeg om haar tande reg te kry. Hy sit en eet alleen aan die punt van die tafel en gaan dan terug na die Griffindortoring terwyl hy aan al die ekstra werk vir die Ontbiedtowerspreuk dink. Bo in die slaapsaal loop hy Ron raak.

“Jy't 'n uil,” sê Ron bruusk die oomblik toe hy instap. Hy wys na Harry se kussing. Die skool se nonnetjiesuil wag daar op hom.

“O – goed,” sê Harry.

“En ons moet ons detensie môreaand in Snerp se kerker gaan doen,” sê Ron.

Sonder om eens na Harry te kyk, stap hy by die vertrek uit. Vir 'n oomblik oorweeg Harry dit om hom agterna te sit – hy's nie seker of hy met hom wil praat en of hy hom wil moker nie, albei gedagtes is ewe aanloklik – maar die lokstem van Sirius se antwoord is te sterk. Harry stap na die nonnetjiesuil, haal die brief van sy been af en rol dit oop.

Harry

Ek kan nie in 'n brief alles sê wat ek wil nie, dis te veel van 'n waagstuk, netnou word die uil onderskep – ons moet praat, van aangesig tot aangesig. Kan jy sorg dat jy alleen by die vuur in die Griffindortoring is teen eenuur op die oggend van die 22ste November?

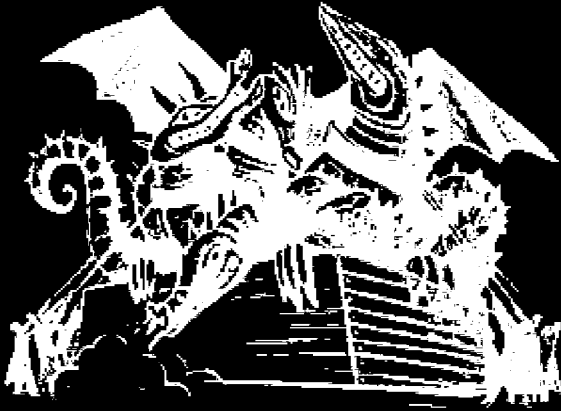
Ek weet beter as enigiemand anders dat jy na jouself kan kyk en terwyl jy by Dompeldorius en Moodie is, glo ek nie dat iemand jou kwaad kan aandoen nie. Dit wil egter lyk asof iemand wel gaan probeer. Om jou vir die Toernooi in te skryf, moet 'n groot waagstuk gewees het, veral so onder Dompeldorius se neus.

Wees op jou hoede, Harry. Ek wil nog steeds van alles wat ongewoon is, hoor.

Laat my so gou moontlik weet van die 22ste November.

Sirius

CHAPTER NINETEEN



THE HUNGARIAN HORNTAIL

The prospect of talking face-to-face with Sirius was all that sustained Harry over the next fortnight, the only bright spot on a horizon that had never looked darker. The shock of finding himself school champion had worn off slightly now, and the fear of what was facing him had started to sink in. The first task was drawing steadily nearer; he felt as though it were crouching ahead of him like some horrific monster, barring his path. He had never suffered nerves like these; they were way beyond anything he had experienced before a Quidditch match, not even his last one against Slytherin, which had decided who would win the Quidditch Cup. Harry was finding it hard to think about the future at all; he felt as though his whole life

had been leading up to, and would finish with, the first task. . . .

Admittedly, he didn't see how Sirius was going to make him feel any better about having to perform an unknown piece of difficult and dangerous magic in front of hundreds of people, but the mere sight of a friendly face would be something at the moment. Harry wrote back to Sirius saying that he would be beside the common room fire at the time Sirius had suggested, and he and Hermione spent a long time going over plans for forcing any stragglers out of the common room on the night in question. If the worst came to the worst, they were going to drop a bag of Dungbombs, but they hoped they wouldn't have to resort to that — Filch would skin them alive.

In the meantime, life became even worse for Harry within the confines of the castle, for Rita Skeeter had published her piece about the Triwizard Tournament, and it had turned out to be not so much a report on the tournament as a highly colored life story of Harry. Much of the front page had been given over to a picture of Harry; the article (continuing on pages two, six, and seven) had been all about Harry, the names of the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang champions (misspelled) had been squashed into the last line of the article, and Cedric hadn't been mentioned at all.

The article had appeared ten days ago, and Harry still got a sick, burning feeling of shame in his stomach every time he thought about it. Rita Skeeter had reported him saying an awful lot of things that he couldn't remember ever saying in his life, let alone in that broom cupboard.

I suppose I get my strength from my parents. I know they'd be very proud of me if they could see me now. . . . Yes,

sometimes at night I still cry about them, I'm not ashamed to admit it. . . . I know nothing will hurt me during the tournament, because they're watching over me. . . .

But Rita Skeeter had gone even further than transforming his “er’s” into long, sickly sentences: She had interviewed other people about him too.

Harry has at last found love at Hogwarts. His close friend, Colin Creevey, says that Harry is rarely seen out of the company of one Hermione Granger, a stunningly pretty Muggle-born girl who, like Harry, is one of the top students in the school.

From the moment the article had appeared, Harry had had to endure people — Slytherins, mainly — quoting it at him as he passed and making sneering comments.

“Want a hanky, Potter, in case you start crying in Transfiguration?”

“Since when have you been one of the top students in the school, Potter? Or is this a school you and Longbottom have set up together?”

“Hey — Harry!”

“Yeah, that’s right!” Harry found himself shouting as he wheeled around in the corridor, having had just about enough. “I’ve just been crying my eyes out over my dead mum, and I’m just off to do a bit more. . . .”

“No — it was just — you dropped your quill.”

It was Cho. Harry felt the color rising in his face.

“Oh — right — sorry,” he muttered, taking the quill back.

“Er . . . good luck on Tuesday,” she said. “I really hope you do well.”

Which left Harry feeling extremely stupid.

Hermione had come in for her fair share of unpleasantness too, but she hadn’t yet started yelling at innocent bystanders; in fact, Harry was full of admiration for the way she was handling the situation.

“*Stunningly pretty? Her?*” Pansy Parkinson had shrieked the first time she had come face-to-face with Hermione after Rita’s article had appeared. “What was she judging against — a chipmunk?”

“Ignore it,” Hermione said in a dignified voice, holding her head in the air and stalking past the sniggering Slytherin girls as though she couldn’t hear them. “Just ignore it, Harry.”

But Harry couldn’t ignore it. Ron hadn’t spoken to him at all since he had told him about Snape’s detentions. Harry had half hoped they would make things up during the two hours they were forced to pickle rats’ brains in Snape’s dungeon, but that had been the day Rita’s article had appeared, which seemed to have confirmed Ron’s belief that Harry was really enjoying all the attention.

Hermione was furious with the pair of them; she went from one to the other, trying to force them to talk to each other, but Harry was adamant: He would talk to Ron again only if Ron admitted that Harry hadn’t put his name in the Goblet of Fire and apologized for calling him a liar.

“I didn’t start this,” Harry said stubbornly. “It’s his problem.”

“You miss him!” Hermione said impatiently. “And I *know* he misses you —”

“*Miss him?*” said Harry. “I don’t *miss him*. . . .”

But this was a downright lie. Harry liked Hermione very much, but she just wasn't the same as Ron. There was much less laughter and a lot more hanging around in the library when Hermione was your best friend. Harry still hadn't mastered Summoning Charms, he seemed to have developed something of a block about them, and Hermione insisted that learning the theory would help. They consequently spent a lot of time poring over books during their lunchtimes.

Viktor Krum was in the library an awful lot too, and Harry wondered what he was up to. Was he studying, or was he looking for things to help him through the first task? Hermione often complained about Krum being there — not that he ever bothered them — but because groups of giggling girls often turned up to spy on him from behind bookshelves, and Hermione found the noise distracting.

“He's not even good-looking!” she muttered angrily, glaring at Krum's sharp profile. “They only like him because he's famous! They wouldn't look twice at him if he couldn't do that Wonky-Faint thing —”

“Wronski Feint,” said Harry, through gritted teeth. Quite apart from liking to get Quidditch terms correct, it caused him another pang to imagine Ron's expression if he could have heard Hermione talking about Wonky-Faints.

It is a strange thing, but when you are dreading something, and would give anything to slow down time, it has a disobliging habit of speeding up. The days until the first task seemed to slip by as though someone had fixed the clocks to work at double speed. Harry's feeling of barely controlled panic was with him wherever he went, as ever-present as the snide comments about the *Daily Prophet* article.

On the Saturday before the first task, all students in the third year and above were permitted to visit the village of Hogsmeade. Hermione told Harry that it would do him good to get away from the castle for a bit, and Harry didn't need much persuasion.

"What about Ron, though?" he said. "Don't you want to go with him?"

"Oh . . . well . . ." Hermione went slightly pink. "I thought we might meet up with him in the Three Broomsticks. . . ."

"No," said Harry flatly.

"Oh Harry, this is so stupid —"

"I'll come, but I'm not meeting Ron, and I'm wearing my Invisibility Cloak."

"Oh all right then . . ." Hermione snapped, "but I hate talking to you in that Cloak, I never know if I'm looking at you or not."

So Harry put on his Invisibility Cloak in the dormitory, went back downstairs, and together he and Hermione set off for Hogsmeade.

Harry felt wonderfully free under the Cloak; he watched other students walking past them as they entered the village, most of them sporting *Support Cedric Diggory!* badges, but no horrible remarks came his way for a change, and nobody was quoting that stupid article.

"People keep looking at *me* now," said Hermione grumpily as they came out of Honeydukes Sweetshop later, eating large cream-filled chocolates. "They think I'm talking to myself."

"Don't move your lips so much then."

"Come *on*, please just take off your Cloak for a bit, no one's going to bother you here."

“Oh yeah?” said Harry. “Look behind you.”

Rita Skeeter and her photographer friend had just emerged from the Three Broomsticks pub. Talking in low voices, they passed right by Hermione without looking at her. Harry backed into the wall of Honeydukes to stop Rita Skeeter from hitting him with her crocodile-skin handbag. When they were gone, Harry said, “She’s staying in the village. I bet she’s coming to watch the first task.”

As he said it, his stomach flooded with a wave of molten panic. He didn’t mention this; he and Hermione hadn’t discussed what was coming in the first task much; he had the feeling she didn’t want to think about it.

“She’s gone,” said Hermione, looking right through Harry toward the end of the street. “Why don’t we go and have a butterbeer in the Three Broomsticks, it’s a bit cold, isn’t it? You don’t have to talk to Ron!” she added irritably, correctly interpreting his silence.

The Three Broomsticks was packed, mainly with Hogwarts students enjoying their free afternoon, but also with a variety of magical people Harry rarely saw anywhere else. Harry supposed that as Hogsmeade was the only all-wizard village in Britain, it was a bit of a haven for creatures like hags, who were not as adept as wizards at disguising themselves.

It was very hard to move through crowds in the Invisibility Cloak, in case you accidentally trod on someone, which tended to lead to awkward questions. Harry edged slowly toward a spare table in the corner while Hermione went to buy drinks. On his way through the pub, Harry spotted Ron, who was sitting with Fred, George, and Lee Jordan. Resisting the urge to give Ron a good hard poke in the back

of the head, he finally reached the table and sat down at it.

Hermione joined him a moment later and slipped him a butterbeer under his Cloak.

“I look like such an idiot, sitting here on my own,” she muttered. “Lucky I brought something to do.”

And she pulled out a notebook in which she had been keeping a record of S.P.E.W. members. Harry saw his and Ron’s names at the top of the very short list. It seemed a long time ago that they had sat making up those predictions together, and Hermione had turned up and appointed them secretary and treasurer.

“You know, maybe I should try and get some of the villagers involved in S.P.E.W.,” Hermione said thoughtfully, looking around the pub.

“Yeah, right,” said Harry. He took a swig of butterbeer under his Cloak. “Hermione, when are you going to give up on this spew stuff?”

“When house-elves have decent wages and working conditions!” she hissed back. “You know, I’m starting to think it’s time for more direct action. I wonder how you get into the school kitchens?”

“No idea, ask Fred and George,” said Harry.

Hermione lapsed into thoughtful silence, while Harry drank his butterbeer, watching the people in the pub. All of them looked cheerful and relaxed. Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbott were swapping Chocolate Frog cards at a nearby table, both of them sporting *Support Cedric Diggory!* badges on their cloaks. Right over by the door he saw Cho and a large group of her Ravenclaw friends. She wasn’t wearing a Cedric badge though. . . . This cheered up

Harry very slightly. . . .

What wouldn't he have given to be one of these people, sitting around laughing and talking, with nothing to worry about but homework? He imagined how it would have felt to be here if his name *hadn't* come out of the Goblet of Fire. He wouldn't be wearing the Invisibility Cloak, for one thing. Ron would be sitting with him. The three of them would probably be happily imagining what deadly dangerous task the school champions would be facing on Tuesday. He'd have been really looking forward to it, watching them do whatever it was . . . cheering on Cedric with everyone else, safe in a seat at the back of the stands. . . .

He wondered how the other champions were feeling. Every time he had seen Cedric lately, he had been surrounded by admirers and looking nervous but excited. Harry glimpsed Fleur Delacour from time to time in the corridors; she looked exactly as she always did, haughty and unruffled. And Krum just sat in the library, poring over books.

Harry thought of Sirius, and the tight, tense knot in his chest seemed to ease slightly. He would be speaking to him in just over twelve hours, for tonight was the night they were meeting at the common room fire — assuming nothing went wrong, as everything else had done lately. . . .

“Look, it's Hagrid!” said Hermione.

The back of Hagrid's enormous shaggy head — he had mercifully abandoned his bunches — emerged over the crowd. Harry wondered why he hadn't spotted him at once, as Hagrid was so large, but standing up carefully, he saw that Hagrid had been leaning low,

talking to Professor Moody. Hagrid had his usual enormous tankard in front of him, but Moody was drinking from his hip flask. Madam Rosmerta, the pretty landlady, didn't seem to think much of this; she was looking askance at Moody as she collected glasses from tables around them. Perhaps she thought it was an insult to her mulled mead, but Harry knew better. Moody had told them all during their last Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson that he preferred to prepare his own food and drink at all times, as it was so easy for Dark wizards to poison an unattended cup.

As Harry watched, he saw Hagrid and Moody get up to leave. He waved, then remembered that Hagrid couldn't see him. Moody, however, paused, his magical eye on the corner where Harry was standing. He tapped Hagrid in the small of the back (being unable to reach his shoulder), muttered something to him, and then the pair of them made their way back across the pub toward Harry and Hermione's table.

"All right, Hermione?" said Hagrid loudly.

"Hello," said Hermione, smiling back.

Moody limped around the table and bent down; Harry thought he was reading the S.P.E.W. notebook, until he muttered, "Nice Cloak, Potter."

Harry stared at him in amazement. The large chunk missing from Moody's nose was particularly obvious at a few inches' distance. Moody grinned.

"Can your eye — I mean, can you — ?"

"Yeah, it can see through Invisibility Cloaks," Moody said quietly. "And it's come in useful at times, I can tell you."

Hagrid was beaming down at Harry too. Harry knew Hagrid couldn't see him, but Moody had obviously told Hagrid he was there. Hagrid now bent down on the pretext of reading the S.P.E.W. notebook as well, and said in a whisper so low that only Harry could hear it, "Harry, meet me tonight at midnight at me cabin. Wear that Cloak."

Straightening up, Hagrid said loudly, "Nice ter see yeh, Hermione," winked, and departed. Moody followed him.

"Why does Hagrid want me to meet him at midnight?" Harry said, very surprised.

"Does he?" said Hermione, looking startled. "I wonder what he's up to? I don't know whether you should go, Harry. . . ." She looked nervously around and hissed, "It might make you late for Sirius."

It was true that going down to Hagrid's at midnight would mean cutting his meeting with Sirius very fine indeed; Hermione suggested sending Hedwig down to Hagrid's to tell him he couldn't go — always assuming she would consent to take the note, of course — Harry, however, thought it better just to be quick at whatever Hagrid wanted him for. He was very curious to know what this might be; Hagrid had never asked Harry to visit him so late at night.

At half past eleven that evening, Harry, who had pretended to go up to bed early, pulled the Invisibility Cloak back over himself and crept back downstairs through the common room. Quite a few people were still in there. The Creevey brothers had managed to get hold of a stack of *Support Cedric Diggory!* badges and were trying to bewitch them to make them say *Support Harry Potter!* instead. So far, however, all they had managed to do was get the badges stuck on

POTTER STINKS. Harry crept past them to the portrait hole and waited for a minute or so, keeping an eye on his watch. Then Hermione opened the Fat Lady for him from outside as they had planned. He slipped past her with a whispered “Thanks!” and set off through the castle.

The grounds were very dark. Harry walked down the lawn toward the lights shining in Hagrid’s cabin. The inside of the enormous Beauxbatons carriage was also lit up; Harry could hear Madame Maxime talking inside it as he knocked on Hagrid’s front door.

“You there, Harry?” Hagrid whispered, opening the door and looking around.

“Yeah,” said Harry, slipping inside the cabin and pulling the Cloak down off his head. “What’s up?”

“Got summat ter show yeh,” said Hagrid.

There was an air of enormous excitement about Hagrid. He was wearing a flower that resembled an oversized artichoke in his buttonhole. It looked as though he had abandoned the use of axle grease, but he had certainly attempted to comb his hair — Harry could see the comb’s broken teeth tangled in it.

“What’re you showing me?” Harry said warily, wondering if the skrewts had laid eggs, or Hagrid had managed to buy another giant three-headed dog off a stranger in a pub.

“Come with me, keep quiet, an’ keep yerself covered with that Cloak,” said Hagrid. “We won’ take Fang, he won’ like it. . . .”

“Listen, Hagrid, I can’t stay long. . . . I’ve got to be back up at the castle by one o’clock —”

But Hagrid wasn’t listening; he was opening the cabin door and

striding off into the night. Harry hurried to follow and found, to his great surprise, that Hagrid was leading him to the Beauxbatons carriage.

“Hagrid, what — ?”

“Shhh!” said Hagrid, and he knocked three times on the door bearing the crossed golden wands.

Madame Maxime opened it. She was wearing a silk shawl wrapped around her massive shoulders. She smiled when she saw Hagrid.

“Ah, ’Agrid . . . it is time?”

“Bong-sewer,” said Hagrid, beaming at her, and holding out a hand to help her down the golden steps.

Madame Maxime closed the door behind her, Hagrid offered her his arm, and they set off around the edge of the paddock containing Madame Maxime’s giant winged horses, with Harry, totally bewildered, running to keep up with them. Had Hagrid wanted to show him Madame Maxime? He could see her any old time he wanted . . . she wasn’t exactly hard to miss. . . .

But it seemed that Madame Maxime was in for the same treat as Harry, because after a while she said playfully, “Wair is it you are taking me, ’Agrid?”

“Yeh’ll enjoy this,” said Hagrid gruffly, “worth seein’, trust me. On’y — don’ go tellin’ anyone I showed yeh, right? Yeh’re not s’posed ter know.”

“Of course not,” said Madame Maxime, fluttering her long black eyelashes.

And still they walked, Harry getting more and more irritated as he

jogged along in their wake, checking his watch every now and then. Hagrid had some harebrained scheme in hand, which might make him miss Sirius. If they didn't get there soon, he was going to turn around, go straight back to the castle, and leave Hagrid to enjoy his moonlit stroll with Madame Maxime. . . .

But then — when they had walked so far around the perimeter of the forest that the castle and the lake were out of sight — Harry heard something. Men were shouting up ahead . . . then came a deafening, earsplitting roar. . . .

Hagrid led Madame Maxime around a clump of trees and came to a halt. Harry hurried up alongside them — for a split second, he thought he was seeing bonfires, and men darting around them — and then his mouth fell open.

Dragons.

Four fully grown, enormous, vicious-looking dragons were rearing onto their hind legs inside an enclosure fenced with thick planks of wood, roaring and snorting — torrents of fire were shooting into the dark sky from their open, fanged mouths, fifty feet above the ground on their outstretched necks. There was a silvery-blue one with long, pointed horns, snapping and snarling at the wizards on the ground; a smooth-scaled green one, which was writhing and stamping with all its might; a red one with an odd fringe of fine gold spikes around its face, which was shooting mushroom-shaped fire clouds into the air; and a gigantic black one, more lizard-like than the others, which was nearest to them.

At least thirty wizards, seven or eight to each dragon, were attempting to control them, pulling on the chains connected to heavy

leather straps around their necks and legs. Mesmerized, Harry looked up, high above him, and saw the eyes of the black dragon, with vertical pupils like a cat's, bulging with either fear or rage, he couldn't tell which. . . . It was making a horrible noise, a yowling, screeching scream. . . .

“Keep back there, Hagrid!” yelled a wizard near the fence, straining on the chain he was holding. “They can shoot fire at a range of twenty feet, you know! I’ve seen this Horntail do forty!”

“Is’n’ it beautiful?” said Hagrid softly.

“It’s no good!” yelled another wizard. “Stunning Spells, on the count of three!”

Harry saw each of the dragon keepers pull out his wand.

“*Stupefy!*” they shouted in unison, and the Stunning Spells shot into the darkness like fiery rockets, bursting in showers of stars on the dragons’ scaly hides —

Harry watched the dragon nearest to them teeter dangerously on its back legs; its jaws stretched wide in a silent howl; its nostrils were suddenly devoid of flame, though still smoking — then, very slowly, it fell. Several tons of sinewy, scaly-black dragon hit the ground with a thud that Harry could have sworn made the trees behind him quake.

The dragon keepers lowered their wands and walked forward to their fallen charges, each of which was the size of a small hill. They hurried to tighten the chains and fasten them securely to iron pegs, which they forced deep into the ground with their wands.

“Wan’ a closer look?” Hagrid asked Madame Maxime excitedly. The pair of them moved right up to the fence, and Harry followed. The wizard who had warned Hagrid not to come any closer turned,

and Harry realized who it was: Charlie Weasley.

“All right, Hagrid?” he panted, coming over to talk. “They should be okay now — we put them out with a Sleeping Draught on the way here, thought it might be better for them to wake up in the dark and the quiet — but, like you saw, they weren’t happy, not happy at all —”

“What breeds you got here, Charlie?” said Hagrid, gazing at the closest dragon, the black one, with something close to reverence. Its eyes were still just open. Harry could see a strip of gleaming yellow beneath its wrinkled black eyelid.

“This is a Hungarian Horntail,” said Charlie. “There’s a Common Welsh Green over there, the smaller one — a Swedish Short-Snout, that blue-gray — and a Chinese Fireball, that’s the red.”

Charlie looked around; Madame Maxime was strolling away around the edge of the enclosure, gazing at the Stunned dragons.

“I didn’t know you were bringing her, Hagrid,” Charlie said, frowning. “The champions aren’t supposed to know what’s coming — she’s bound to tell her student, isn’t she?”

“Jus’ thought she’d like ter see ’em,” shrugged Hagrid, still gazing, enraptured, at the dragons.

“Really romantic date, Hagrid,” said Charlie, shaking his head.

“Four . . .” said Hagrid, “so it’s one fer each o’ the champions, is it? What’ve they gotta do — fight ’em?”

“Just get past them, I think,” said Charlie. “We’ll be on hand if it gets nasty, Extinguishing Spells at the ready. They wanted nesting mothers, I don’t know why . . . but I tell you this, I don’t envy the one who gets the Horntail. Vicious thing. Its back end’s as dangerous as its front, look.”

Charlie pointed toward the Horntail's tail, and Harry saw long, bronze-colored spikes protruding along it every few inches.

Five of Charlie's fellow keepers staggered up to the Horntail at that moment, carrying a clutch of huge granite-gray eggs between them in a blanket. They placed them carefully at the Horntail's side. Hagrid let out a moan of longing.

"I've got them counted, Hagrid," said Charlie sternly. Then he said, "How's Harry?"

"Fine," said Hagrid. He was still gazing at the eggs.

"Just hope he's still fine after he's faced this lot," said Charlie grimly, looking out over the dragons' enclosure. "I didn't dare tell Mum what he's got to do for the first task; she's already having kittens about him. . . ." Charlie imitated his mother's anxious voice. "*'How could they let him enter that tournament, he's much too young! I thought they were all safe, I thought there was going to be an age limit!'*" She was in floods after that *Daily Prophet* article about him. *'He still cries about his parents! Oh bless him, I never knew!'*"

Harry had had enough. Trusting to the fact that Hagrid wouldn't miss him, with the attractions of four dragons and Madame Maxime to occupy him, he turned silently and began to walk away, back to the castle.

He didn't know whether he was glad he'd seen what was coming or not. Perhaps this way was better. The first shock was over now. Maybe if he'd seen the dragons for the first time on Tuesday, he would have passed out cold in front of the whole school . . . but maybe he would anyway. . . . He was going to be armed with his

wand — which, just now, felt like nothing more than a narrow strip of wood — against a fifty-foot-high, scaly, spike-ridden, fire-breathing dragon. And he had to get past it. With everyone watching. *How?*

Harry sped up, skirting the edge of the forest; he had just under fifteen minutes to get back to the fireside and talk to Sirius, and he couldn't remember, ever, wanting to talk to someone more than he did right now — when, without warning, he ran into something very solid.

Harry fell backward, his glasses askew, clutching the Cloak around him. A voice nearby said, "Ouch! Who's there?"

Harry hastily checked that the Cloak was covering him and lay very still, staring up at the dark outline of the wizard he had hit. He recognized the goatee . . . it was Karkaroff.

"Who's there?" said Karkaroff again, very suspiciously, looking around in the darkness. Harry remained still and silent. After a minute or so, Karkaroff seemed to decide that he had hit some sort of animal; he was looking around at waist height, as though expecting to see a dog. Then he crept back under the cover of the trees and started to edge forward toward the place where the dragons were.

Very slowly and very carefully, Harry got to his feet and set off again as fast as he could without making too much noise, hurrying through the darkness back toward Hogwarts.

He had no doubt whatsoever what Karkaroff was up to. He had sneaked off his ship to try and find out what the first task was going to be. He might even have spotted Hagrid and Madame Maxime heading off around the forest together — they were hardly difficult to

spot at a distance . . . and now all Karkaroff had to do was follow the sound of voices, and he, like Madame Maxime, would know what was in store for the champions.

By the looks of it, the only champion who would be facing the unknown on Tuesday was Cedric.

Harry reached the castle, slipped in through the front doors, and began to climb the marble stairs; he was very out of breath, but he didn't dare slow down. . . . He had less than five minutes to get up to the fire. . . .

"Balderdash!" he gasped at the Fat Lady, who was snoozing in her frame in front of the portrait hole.

"If you say so," she muttered sleepily, without opening her eyes, and the picture swung forward to admit him. Harry climbed inside. The common room was deserted, and, judging by the fact that it smelled quite normal, Hermione had not needed to set off any Dungbombs to ensure that he and Sirius got privacy.

Harry pulled off the Invisibility Cloak and threw himself into an armchair in front of the fire. The room was in semidarkness; the flames were the only source of light. Nearby, on a table, the *Support Cedric Diggory!* badges the Creeveys had been trying to improve were glinting in the firelight. They now read *POTTER REALLY STINKS*. Harry looked back into the flames, and jumped.

Sirius's head was sitting in the fire. If Harry hadn't seen Mr. Diggory do exactly this back in the Weasleys' kitchen, it would have scared him out of his wits. Instead, his face breaking into the first smile he had worn for days, he scrambled out of his chair, crouched down by the hearth, and said, "Sirius — how're you doing?"

Sirius looked different from Harry's memory of him. When they had said good-bye, Sirius's face had been gaunt and sunken, surrounded by a quantity of long, black, matted hair — but the hair was short and clean now, Sirius's face was fuller, and he looked younger, much more like the only photograph Harry had of him, which had been taken at the Potters' wedding.

"Never mind me, how are you?" said Sirius seriously.

"I'm —" For a second, Harry tried to say "fine" — but he couldn't do it. Before he could stop himself, he was talking more than he'd talked in days — about how no one believed he hadn't entered the tournament of his own free will, how Rita Skeeter had lied about him in the *Daily Prophet*, how he couldn't walk down a corridor without being sneered at — and about Ron, Ron not believing him, Ron's jealousy . . .

". . . and now Hagrid's just shown me what's coming in the first task, and it's dragons, Sirius, and I'm a goner," he finished desperately.

Sirius looked at him, eyes full of concern, eyes that had not yet lost the look that Azkaban had given them — that deadened, haunted look. He had let Harry talk himself into silence without interruption, but now he said, "Dragons we can deal with, Harry, but we'll get to that in a minute — I haven't got long here . . . I've broken into a Wizing house to use the fire, but they could be back at any time. There are things I need to warn you about."

"What?" said Harry, feeling his spirits slip a further few notches. . . . Surely there could be nothing worse than dragons coming?

“Karkaroff,” said Sirius. “Harry, he was a Death Eater. You know what Death Eaters are, don’t you?”

“Yes — he — what?”

“He was caught, he was in Azkaban with me, but he got released. I’d bet everything that’s why Dumbledore wanted an Auror at Hogwarts this year — to keep an eye on him. Moody caught Karkaroff. Put him into Azkaban in the first place.”

“Karkaroff got released?” Harry said slowly — his brain seemed to be struggling to absorb yet another piece of shocking information. “Why did they release him?”

“He did a deal with the Ministry of Magic,” said Sirius bitterly. “He said he’d seen the error of his ways, and then he named names . . . he put a load of other people into Azkaban in his place. . . . He’s not very popular in there, I can tell you. And since he got out, from what I can tell, he’s been teaching the Dark Arts to every student who passes through that school of his. So watch out for the Durmstrang champion as well.”

“Okay,” said Harry slowly. “But . . . are you saying Karkaroff put my name in the goblet? Because if he did, he’s a really good actor. He seemed furious about it. He wanted to stop me from competing.”

“We know he’s a good actor,” said Sirius, “because he convinced the Ministry of Magic to set him free, didn’t he? Now, I’ve been keeping an eye on the *Daily Prophet*, Harry —”

“— you and the rest of the world,” said Harry bitterly.

“— and reading between the lines of that Skeeter woman’s article last month, Moody was attacked the night before he started at Hogwarts. Yes, I know she says it was another false alarm,” Sirius

said hastily, seeing Harry about to speak, “but I don’t think so, somehow. I think someone tried to stop him from getting to Hogwarts. I think someone knew their job would be a lot more difficult with him around. And no one’s going to look into it too closely; Mad-Eye’s heard intruders a bit too often. But that doesn’t mean he can’t still spot the real thing. Moody was the best Auror the Ministry ever had.”

“So . . . what are you saying?” said Harry slowly. “Karkaroff’s trying to kill me? But — why?”

Sirius hesitated.

“I’ve been hearing some very strange things,” he said slowly. “The Death Eaters seem to be a bit more active than usual lately. They showed themselves at the Quidditch World Cup, didn’t they? Someone set off the Dark Mark . . . and then — did you hear about that Ministry of Magic witch who’s gone missing?”

“Bertha Jorkins?” said Harry.

“Exactly . . . she disappeared in Albania, and that’s definitely where Voldemort was rumored to be last . . . and she would have known the Triwizard Tournament was coming up, wouldn’t she?”

“Yeah, but . . . it’s not very likely she’d have walked straight into Voldemort, is it?” said Harry.

“Listen, I knew Bertha Jorkins,” said Sirius grimly. “She was at Hogwarts when I was, a few years above your dad and me. And she was an idiot. Very nosy, but no brains, none at all. It’s not a good combination, Harry. I’d say she’d be very easy to lure into a trap.”

“So . . . so Voldemort could have found out about the tournament?” said Harry. “Is that what you mean? You think Karkaroff might be here on his orders?”

“I don’t know,” said Sirius slowly, “I just don’t know . . . Karkaroff doesn’t strike me as the type who’d go back to Voldemort unless he knew Voldemort was powerful enough to protect him. But whoever put your name in that goblet did it for a reason, and I can’t help thinking the tournament would be a very good way to attack you and make it look like an accident.”

“Looks like a really good plan from where I’m standing,” said Harry, grinning bleakly. “They’ll just have to stand back and let the dragons do their stuff.”

“Right — these dragons,” said Sirius, speaking very quickly now. “There’s a way, Harry. Don’t be tempted to try a Stunning Spell — dragons are strong and too powerfully magical to be knocked out by a single Stunner, you need about half a dozen wizards at a time to overcome a dragon —”

“Yeah, I know, I just saw,” said Harry.

“But you can do it alone,” said Sirius. “There is a way, and a simple spell’s all you need. Just —”

But Harry held up a hand to silence him, his heart suddenly pounding as though it would burst. He could hear footsteps coming down the spiral staircase behind him.

“Go!” he hissed at Sirius. “*Go!* There’s someone coming!”

Harry scrambled to his feet, hiding the fire — if someone saw Sirius’s face within the walls of Hogwarts, they would raise an almighty uproar — the Ministry would get dragged in — he, Harry, would be questioned about Sirius’s whereabouts —

Harry heard a tiny *pop!* in the fire behind him and knew Sirius had gone. He watched the bottom of the spiral staircase. Who had

decided to go for a stroll at one o'clock in the morning, and stopped Sirius from telling him how to get past a dragon?

It was Ron. Dressed in his maroon paisley pajamas, Ron stopped dead facing Harry across the room, and looked around.

“Who were you talking to?” he said.

“What’s that got to do with you?” Harry snarled. “What are you doing down here at this time of night?”

“I just wondered where you —” Ron broke off, shrugging. “Nothing. I’m going back to bed.”

“Just thought you’d come nosing around, did you?” Harry shouted. He knew that Ron had no idea what he’d walked in on, knew he hadn’t done it on purpose, but he didn’t care — at this moment he hated everything about Ron, right down to the several inches of bare ankle showing beneath his pajama trousers.

“Sorry about that,” said Ron, his face reddening with anger. “Should’ve realized you didn’t want to be disturbed. I’ll let you get on with practicing for your next interview in peace.”

Harry seized one of the *POTTER REALLY STINKS* badges off the table and chucked it, as hard as he could, across the room. It hit Ron on the forehead and bounced off.

“There you go,” Harry said. “Something for you to wear on Tuesday. You might even have a scar now, if you’re lucky. . . . That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

He strode across the room toward the stairs; he half expected Ron to stop him, he would even have liked Ron to throw a punch at him, but Ron just stood there in his too-small pajamas, and Harry, having stormed upstairs, lay awake in bed fuming for a long time afterward

and didn't hear him come up to bed.

Die Hongaarse Horingstert

Die vooruitsig om van aangesig tot aangesig met Sirius te gesels, is al wat Harry tydens die volgende twee weke aan die gang hou, die enigste ligpunt op 'n horsion wat nog nooit donkerder gelyk het nie. Die skok toe hy moes uitvind dat hy 'n skoolkampioen is, het nou al ietwat vervaag en die vrees vir wat op hom wag, het begin insink. Die eerste taak kom onverbiddelik nader; dit voel vir hom asof dit soos 'n aaklige hurkende monster die pad voor hom versper. Hy was nog nooit so op sy senuwees nie; hy voel baie erger as wat hy nog ooit voor 'n Kwiddiekwedstryd gevoel het, selfs met die laaste beslissende wedstryd teen Slibberin toe hulle vir die Kwiddiekbeker moes uitspeel. Dis vir Harry moeilik om aan die toekoms te dink. Dit voel asof sy hele lewe hierop afgestuur het en hier, met die eerste taak, gaan eindig . . .

Hy moet erken dat hy nie weet hoe Sirius hom gaan laat beter voel oor hierdie onbekende, moeilike en gevaarlike stuk towerkuns wat hy voor honderde mense moet doen nie, maar 'n vriendelike gesig sal op die oomblik welkom wees. Harry skryf dus aan Sirius om te sê dat hy op die afgesproke tyd voor die vuurherd in die geselskamer sal wees en hy en Hermien maak lank planne oor hoe hulle enige laatblyers daardie aand uit die geselskamer sal jaag. Op sy ergste kan hulle altyd 'n sak Misbomme gooi, maar hopelik sal dit nie nodig wees nie – Fillis sal hul velle van hul lywe aftrek.

Intussen word die lewe binne die kasteelmure nog slegter vir Harry, want toe Rika Skinner se artikel oor die Drietowenaarstoernooi verskyn, is dit glad nie so danig 'n berig oor die Toernooi nie, maar eerder 'n uiters kleurvolle lewensverhaal van Harry. Die grootste deel van die voorblad word deur 'n foto van Harry in beslag geneem; die artikel (wat op bladsye twee, ses en sewe voortgaan) handel net oor Harry. Beauxbatons en Durmstrang se kampioene se name is verkeerd gespél en boonop in die laaste reël ingedruk en Cedric word nie eens genoem nie.

Die artikel het reeds tien dae tevore verskyn, maar Harry kry nog steeds 'n brandende siek gevoel van skaamte op sy maag elke keer dat hy daaraan dink. Rika Skinner het 'n klomp goed aan hom toegedig. Dinge

wat hy seker is hy in sy lewe nooit eens gedink het nie en wat hy baie beslis nie daar in die besemkas sou gesê het nie.

“Ek veronderstel dat ek my krag van my ouers kry, ek weet hulle sou baie trots op my gewees het as hulle my nou kon sien . . . Ja, ek huil nog soms oor hulle, ek is nie skaam om dit te erken nie . . . Ek weet niks kan my enige kwaad tydens die Toernooi aandoen nie omdat hulle oor my waak . . .”

Rika Skinner het egter verder gegaan as om bloot sy ge-e in lang, sieklike sinne te omskep: sy het ook met ander mense oor hom onderhoude gevoer.

Harry het uiteindelik hier by Hogwarts liefde gevind. Sy boesemvriend, Colin Creevey, sê Harry is feitlik altyd in die geselskap van ene Hermien la Grange, ’n betowerende mooi Moggelgebore meisie wat net soos Harry een van die topstudente in die skool is.

Van die eerste oomblik dat die artikel verskyn het, moet Harry dit verduur dat mense – hoofsaaklik Slibberins – hom aanhaal en snydende aanmerkings maak as hulle verbystap.

“Wat van ’n sakdoek, Potter, ingeval jy tydens Transfigurasie begin huil?”

“Van wanneer af is jy nogal een van die topstudente in die skool, Potter? Of is dit ’n skool wat jy en Loggerenberg saam begin het?”

“Haai – Harry!”

“Ja, dis reg,” hoor Harry homself skree toe hy om die hoek stap. Hy het nou regtig genoeg gehad. “Ek het so pas my oë uitgehuil oor my ma wat dood is en ek gaan net gou nog ’n bietjie . . .”

“Nee – dis net – jy’t jou veerpen laat val.”

Dit is Cho. Harry voel hoe die kleur in sy gesig opstoot.

“O – goed – jammer,” mompel hy terwyl hy die veerpen by haar neem.

“H’m . . . sterkte vir Dinsdag,” sê sy. “Ek hoop regtig dat jy goed sal vaar.”

Dit laat Harry behoorlik simpel voel.

Hermien het ook ’n deel van die onaangenaamheid ontvang, maar sy het nog nie begin om op onskuldige omstanders te skree nie; Harry is, om die waarheid te sê, vol bewondering vir die manier waarop sy die situasie hanteer.

“Betowerend mooi? Sy?” skree Pansy Parkinson die eerste keer toe sy vir Hermien na die verskyning van Rika Skinner se artikel sien. “Waarteen meet hulle dit – ’n eekhoring?”

“Ignoreer dit,” sê Hermien in ’n waardige stem terwyl sy met haar kop

in die lug verby die giggelende Slibberin-meisies stap asof sy hulle glad nie kan hoor nie. "Ignoreer dit net, Harry."

Harry kan dit egter nie ignoreer nie. Ron het nog nie weer met hom gepraat sedert hy vir hom van Snerp se detensie gesê het nie. Harry het so half gehoop dat hulle dinge sal uitpraat tydens die twee uur waarin hulle gedwing was om rotbreine in Snerp se kerker te piekel, maar dit was die dag waarop Rika se artikel verskyn het en dit het gelyk asof dit Ron se gevoel dat Harry al die aandag geniet bloot versterk het.

Hermien is woedend vir die tweestuks; sy gaan van die een na die ander en probeer hulle dwing om met mekaar te praat, maar Harry is onwrikbaar: hy sal eers weer met Ron praat wanneer Ron erken het dat Harry nie sy naam in die Beker Vol Vuur gesit het nie en verskoning gevra het oor hy hom 'n leuenaar genoem het.

"Ek het nie begin nie," sê Harry koppig. "Dis sy probleem."

"Jy mis hom!" sê Hermien ongeduldig. "En ek weet dat hy jou mis!"

"Mis hom?" sê Harry. "Ek mis hom g'n . . ."

Dit is egter 'n volslae leuen. Harry hou baie van Hermien, maar sy is net nie dieselfde as Ron nie. Daar is baie minder laggery en baie meer van 'n rondhangery in die biblioteek as Hermien jou beste maat is. Harry kry die Ontbiedtowerspreuk nog glad nie reg nie, en dit lyk asof hy so ietwat van 'n blokkasie daaroor ontwikkel het, maar Hermien hou vol dat dit sal help as hy die teorie bemeester. Hulle sit dus gereeld tydens die middag-pouse en lees.

Viktor Krum is ook gereeld in die biblioteek en Harry wonder wat hy daar doen. Studeer hy, of is hy op soek na dinge wat hom met die eerste taak kan help? Hermien kla gereeld oor Krum daar is – nie dat hy hulle ooit pla nie, maar wel omdat groepies giggelende meisies dikwels opdaag om van agter die boekrakke op hom te spioeneer sodat die geraas Hermien pla.

"Hy is nie eens aantreklik nie!" mompel sy vererg terwyl sy na Krum se skerp profiel gluur. "Hulle hou net van hom omdat hy beroemd is! Hulle sal nie twee keer na hom kyk as hy nie daardie Wonkie-fnuiklag kon doen –"

"Wronski-fnuikslag," sê Harry deur sy tande. Behalwe dat hy daarvan hou dat die Kwiddiekterme korrek gebruik word, kan hy nie anders as om te wonder hoe Ron se gesig sal lyk as hy Hermien van 'n "Wonkie-fnuiklag" moet hoor praat nie.

Dit is 'n snaakse ding, maar wanneer 'n mens vir iets bang is én enigiets sal doen sodat die tyd stadig moet verbygaan, dan gaan die tyd juis al vinniger verby. Dis asof die dae voor die eerste taak al gouer verbyglip nes of iemand al die horlosies gestel het om twee maal so vinnig as gewoonlik te loop. Die gevoel van haas onbeheerbare paniek volg Harry oral,

waar hy hom ook al draai, net soos die geniepsige aanmerkings oor die artikel in die *Daaglikse Profeet*.

Op die Saterdag voor die eerste taak word al die studente in hul derde jaar en hoër toegelaat om die dorpie van Hogsmeade te besoek. Hermien sê vir Harry dat dit hom goed sal doen om 'n bietjie van die kasteel af weg te kom en dit is nie moeilik om Harry te oorreed nie.

“Maar wat van Ron?” sê hy. “Wil jy nie saam met hom gaan nie?”

“O . . . wel . . .” Hermien word effens pienk. “Ek het gedink dat ons mekaar in die Drie Besemstokke kan kry . . .”

“Nee,” sê Harry botweg.

“Ag, Harry, dit is so simpel –”

“Ek sal kom, maar ek gaan nie vir Ron iewers kry nie en ek gaan my onsigbaarheidsmantel dra.”

“Nou maar goed dan,” snou Hermien hom toe, “maar ek haat dit om met jou te praat as jy daardie mantel aanhet, ek weet nooit of ek na jou kyk of nie.”

Harry gaan gooi dus sy onsigbaarheidsmantel in die slaapsaal oor hom, stap weer ondertoe en hy en Hermien sit saam af Hogsmeade toe.

Harry voel wonderlik vry so onder die mantel; hy kyk na die ander studente wat verby hulle stap toe hulle die dorpie ingaan. Die meeste dra *Ondersteun CEDRIC DIGGORY*-wapens, maar vir 'n verandering kom daar geen katterige aanmerkings na sy kant toe nie en niemand haal uit die simpel artikel aan nie.

“Almal kyk nou vir my,” sê Hermien iesegrimmig toe hulle met groot roomge vulde sjokolades by Honeydukes se lekkergoedwinkel uitstap. “Hulle dink ek praat met myself.”

“Moet dan nie jou lippe so erg beweeg nie.”

“Komaan, haal daardie mantel asseblief net vir 'n rukkie af. Niemand gaan jou hier pla nie.”

“O ja?” sê Harry. “Kyk agter jou.”

Rika Skinner en haar fotograaf-vriend het so pas by die Drie Besemstokke uitgekom. Hulle praat in gedempte stemme en stap verby Hermien sonder om eens na haar te kyk. Harry moet homself teen Honeydukes se muur platsmeer om te verhoed dat Rika Skinner met haar krokodilvelhandsak teen hom stamp.

Toe hulle weg is, sê Harry, “Sy bly in die dorp oor. Ek wed sy't gekom om die eerste taak te sien.”

Toe hy dit sê, is dit asof sy maag vol gesmelte paniek word. Hy praat nie daaroor nie; hy en Hermien het nog nie juis bespiegel oor wat die eerste taak kan wees nie; hy het 'n gevoel dat sy liewer nie daaraan wil dink nie.

“Sy's weg,” sê Hermien terwyl sy dwarsdeur Harry in Hoogstraat af kyk. “Hoekom gaan drink ons nie 'n beker Botterbier in die Drie Besem-

stokke nie? Dis 'n bietjie koud, of hoe? Jy hoef nie met Ron te praat nie," voeg sy gefrustreerd by toe sy die stilte korrek opsom.

Die Drie Besemstokke is gepak, hoofsaaklik met Hogwarts-studente wat hul afmiddag geniet, maar ook met 'n verskeidenheid towenaars wat Harry nog nêrens anders gesien het nie. Harry dink dat omdat Hogsmeade die enigste dorp in Brittanje is waarin alleenlik towenaars woon, dit ook 'n heenkome is vir skepsels wat nie juis goed met vermomming is nie.

Dit is moeilik om met die onsigbaarheidsmantel deur die skare te beweeg, ingeval jy per ongeluk op iemand trap wat dan ongemaklike vrae vra. Harry skuifel versigtig na 'n leë tafel in die hoek terwyl Hermien iets te drinke gaan koop. In die verbygaan sien hy vir Ron waar hy by Fred, George en Lee Jordaan sit. Hy moet veg teen die drang om Ron 'n harde klap teen die agterkop te gee, bereik uiteindelik die leë tafel en gaan sit.

Hermien sluit 'n rukkie later by hom aan en gee vir hom 'n Botterbier onder sy mantel aan.

"Ek lyk soos 'n absolute idioot so op my eie," brom sy. "Gelukkig het ek iets gebring om te doen."

Sy haal die notaboek uit waarin sy al die S.P.O.E.G.-lede aanteken. Harry sien dat sy en Ron se name boaan 'n baie kort lys is. Dit voel na bitter lank gelede toe hulle daardie voorspellings sit en opmaak het en Hermien hulle twee as sekretaris en tesourier aangestel het.

"Weet jy, dalk moet ek probeer om sommige van die dorpenaars by S.P.O.E.G. te betrek," sê Hermien peinsend terwyl sy in die kroeg rondkyk.

"Ja, goed," sê Harry. Hy neem 'n sluk Botterbier onder sy mantel. "Hermien, wanneer gaan jy hierdie S.P.O.E.G.-besigheid laat staan?"

"Wanneer die huiselwe ordentlike lone en werksomstandighede het," sis sy terug. "Weet jy, ek begin dink dat dit tyd vir meer direkte aksie is. Ek wonder hoe 'n mens in die skool se kombuis kom?"

"Het nie 'n idee nie. Vra vir Fred en George," sê Harry.

Hermien verval in 'n peinsende stilte terwyl Harry sy Botterbier drink en na die mense in die kroeg kyk. Almal lyk vrolik en ontspanne. Ernie Macmillan en Hanna Abbott ruil Sjokoladepadda-kaarte by 'n tafel daar naby uit en albei van hulle dra *Ondersteun CEDRIC DIGGORY*-wapens op hul mantels. By die deur sien hy vir Cho en 'n groot groep van haar Raweklou-vriende. Sy dra nie 'n CEDRIC-wapen nie . . . dit laat Harry 'n bietjie opflikker . . .

Hy sal enigiets gee om een van daardie mense te kan wees, om te sit en lag en skerts met niks behalwe huiswerk om hom oor te bekommer nie. Hy probeer hom indink hoe dit sou gewees het as sy naam *nie* uit die Beker Vol Vuur gekom het nie. Hy sou nie sy onsigbaarheidsmantel aangehad het nie. Ron sou hier by hom gesit het. Die drie van hulle sou

waarskynlik lekker sit en wonder het oor die dodelik gevaarlike ding wat die skoolkampioene Dinsdag die hoof moet bied. Hy sou regtig daarna uitgesien het om te kyk hoe hulle dit doen, wat dit ook al mag wees . . . saam met al die ander vir Cedric geskree het, iewers veilig in 'n sitplek agter op die pawiljoen . . .

Hy wonder hoe die ander kampioene voel. Elke keer dat hy die laaste tyd vir Cedric sien, is hy omring deur bewonderaars en lyk hy senuagtig maar ook opgewonde. Harry kry so nou en dan 'n glimp van Fleur Delacour in die gange; sy lyk, nes altyd, hoogmoedig en onverstoord. Krum sit die hele tyd in die biblioteek en boeke lees.

Harry dink aan Sirius en die stywe, gespanne knoop in sy maag word so ietwat slapper. Oor net meer as twaalf uur gaan hy met hom praat, want vannag is die nag dat hulle in die vuur in die geselskamer gaan ontmoet – dis nou mits niks verkeerd loop nie, iets wat deesdae gereeld gebeur . . .

“Kyk, daar’s Hagrid!” sê Hermien.

Die agterkant van Hagrid se enorme harige kop – hy het sy perdesterte genadiglik laat vaar – verskyn bo die skare. Harry wonder waarom hy hom nie dadelik raak gesien het nie, Hagrid is so groot, maar toe hy versigtig opstaan, sien hy dat Hagrid laag oorgebuig het om met professor Moodie te praat. Hagrid het sy gewone enorme drinkkan voor hom, maar Moodie drink uit sy heupfles. Dit lyk asof Madame Rosmerta, die aanvallige eienares, nie te veel hiervan dink nie; sy kyk skeef na Moodie toe sy die glase op die tafels rondom hulle bymekaarmaak. Dalk dink sy dat dit 'n belediging vir haar heuningbier is, maar Harry weet beter. Moodie het tydens hul laaste Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-les vir hulle gesê dat hy verkies om sy eie kos en drank te alle tye self voor te berei omdat 'n Donker towenaar 'n onbewaakte beker maklik kan vergiftig.

Terwyl Harry toekyk, sien hy hoe Hagrid en Moodie opstaan om te loop. Hy wuif en onthou dan dat Hagrid hom nie kan sien nie. Moodie gaan egter staan, sy magiese oog op die hoek waar Harry is. Hy tik teen Hagrid se rug (dis onmoontlik om Hagrid se skouer by te kom), mompel iets vir hom en daarna kies die tweestuks koers deur die kroeg na Harry en Hermien se tafel toe.

“Alles reg, Hermien?” sê Hagrid hard.

“Hallo,” sê Hermien met 'n glimlag.

Moodie hink om die tafel en buk; Harry dink eers dat hy die S.P.O.E.G.-notaboek lees, tot hy hom “Oulike mantel, Potter,” hoor mompel.

Harry gaap hom verbaas aan. Op so 'n kort afstand is die groot stuk wat uit Moodie se neus makeer, besonder opvallend. Moodie grinnik.

“Kan u oog – ek bedoel, kan u –?”

“Ja, ek kan deur onsigbaarheidsmantels sien,” sê Moodie sag. “Dit is soms nogal handig, ek sê jou.”

Hagrid glimlag ook stralend vir Harry. Harry weet dat Hagrid hom nie

kan sien nie, maar Moodie het duidelik vir Hagrid gesê dat hy daar is.

Hagrid buk ook oor onder die voorwendsel dat hy die S.P.O.E.G.-nota-boek lees en sê in so 'n sagte fluisterstem dat net Harry hom kan hoor, "Harry, kom sien my om middernag in my hut. Dra daardie mantel."

Toe hy orent kom, sê Hagrid hard, "Gaaf om jou te sien, Hermien," knip-oog en stap uit met Moodie agterna.

"Hoekom wil hy my om middernag sien?" sê Harry verbaas.

"Wil hy?" sê Hermien wat verskrik lyk. "Ek wonder wat hy in die mou voor? Ek weet nie of jy moet gaan nie, Harry . . ." Sy kyk verbouereerd rond en sis, "Dit kan maak dat jy laat is vir Sirius."

Dit is waar dat as hy om middernag na Hagrid moet gaan, sy ontmoeting met Sirius baie fyn gesny sal wees; Hermien stel voor dat hy vir Hedwig na Hagrid stuur om te sê dat hy nie kan kom nie – dis natuurlik mits hy instem om die nota te neem. Harry dink egter dat dit beter is om dit wat Hagrid gedoen wil hê net vinnig te gaan doen; Hagrid het hom nog nooit gevra om so laat in die nag na hom toe te kom nie.

Daardie aand om halftwaalf gooi Harry, wat gemaak het asof hy vroeg bed toe gaan, die onsigbaarheidsmantel weer oor hom en sluip dan ondertoe en deur die geselskamer. Daar is nog 'n hele paar mense. Die Creeveybroers het 'n stapel *Ondersteun CEDRIC DIGGORY*-wapens in die hande gekry en probeer hulle betower sodat hulle *Ondersteun HARRY POTTER* sê. Tot dusver is al wat hulle kon regkry om die wapens op *POTTER STINK* te laat vashaak. Harry kruip verby hulle na die portretopening en wag 'n paar minute terwyl hy sy oog op sy horlosie hou. Toe maak Hermien die Vet Vrou vir hom van buite af oop soos hulle beplan het. Hy glip met 'n gefluisterde "Dankie!" verby haar en laat vat deur die kasteel.

Die terrein is baie donker. Harry stap oor die grasperk na die lig wat uit Hagrid se hut straal. Die binnekant van die enorme Beauxbatons-koets is ook verlig; toe Harry aan Hagrid se voordeur klop, hoor hy hoe Madame Maxine daar binne-in praat.

"Is jy daar, Harry?" fluister Hagrid toe hy die deur oopmaak en om hom kyk.

"Ja," sê Harry. Hy glip in die hut en trek die mantel van sy kop af. "Wat gaan aan?"

"Het iets om vir jou te wys," sê Hagrid.

Hagrid is geweldig opgewonde. Hy dra 'n blom wat soos 'n oorgroot artisjok lyk in sy knoopsgat. Dit lyk nie of hy nog steeds die haarghries gebruik nie, maar hy het sy hare beslis gekam – Harry sien 'n paar gebreekte tande van 'n kam wat daarin gekoek is.

"Wat wil jy vir my wys?" vra Harry versigtig terwyl hy wonder of die Krewels eiers gelê het en of Hagrid dalk nog 'n driekoppige hond by 'n vreemdeling in 'n kroeg gekoop het.

“Kom saam met my, maar bly stil en maak jouself toe onder daardie mantel,” sê Hagrid. “Ons gaan nie vir Tande vat nie, hy sal nie daarvan hou nie . . .”

“Luister, Hagrid, ek kan nie lank bly nie . . . ek moet teen eenuur terug in die kasteel wees –”

Hagrid luister egter nie; hy maak die hut se deur oop en stap die nag in. Harry haas hom agterna en vind, tot sy groot verbasing, dat Hagrid hom na Beauxbatons se koets lei.

“Hagrid, wat –?”

“Sjji!” sê Hagrid en klop drie maal aan die deur wat met gekruiste goue towerstawwe versier is.

Madame Maxine maak dit oop. Sy het ’n sysjaal om haar massiewe skouers gewikkel. Sy glimlag toe sy vir Hagrid sien. “A, ’Agrid . . . dit is tyd?”

“Op die kop,” sê Hagrid stralend terwyl hy ’n hand uitsteek om haar by die goue trappe af te help.

Madame Maxine maak die deur agter haar toe, Hagrid bied sy arm vir haar aan en hulle stap om die kamp waarin Madame Maxine se reuse-geveleulde perde staan terwyl ’n verwilderde Harry moet uithaal om by te hou. Wil Hagrid dan vir Madame Maxine vir hom wys? Hy kan haar tog enige tyd sien . . . ’n mens kan haar nie juis mis kyk nie . . .

Dit blyk egter dat Madame Maxine op dieselfde manier as Harry getrakteer gaan word, want ’n rukkie later vra sy speels, “Waarheen neem jy my, ’Agrid?”

“Jy sal hiervan hou,” sê Hagrid skor. “Dis dit werd, glo my. Dis net – moet vir niemand sê dat ek vir jou gewys het nie, oukei? Jy’s nie veronderstel om te weet nie.”

“Natuurlik nie,” sê Madame Maxine en sy fladder haar swart wimpers.

Hulle stap nog steeds. Harry raak al hoe meer geïrriteerd terwyl hy agterna draf en elke nou en dan na sy horlosie loer. Hagrid het die een of ander onbesonne idee wat sal maak dat hy vir Sirius misloop. As hulle nie gou daar kom nie, gaan hy omdraai, reguit terug kasteel toe, en Hagrid net daar los om sy middernagtlike wandeling met Madame Maxine . . .

Maar toe – net toe hulle so ver om die Woud geloop het dat die kasteel en die meer buite sig is – hoor Harry iets. Voor hom skree mense . . . dan volg ’n dawerende, oorverdowende gebrul . . .

Hagrid lei vir Madame Maxine om ’n klomp bome waar hy tot stilstand kom. Harry haas hom tot langs hulle – vir ’n breukdeel van ’n sekonde verbeel hy hom dat hy vreugdevure sien en mense wat om hulle dans – dan val sy mond oop.

Drake.

Vier tamaai, volgroeide, wreedaardige drake steier brullend en snor-

kend op hul agterpote rond in 'n kamp wat met swaar houtplanke toegemaak is. Vuurtonge klim die donker lug in vanuit oopgesperde kake vol slagande op langgerekte nekke twintig meter bo die grond. Daar is 'n silwerbloue met lang gepunte horings wat snouend na die towenaars op die grond kap; 'n groene met gladde skubbe wat met al sy mag wriemel en stamp; 'n rooie met 'n snaakse raam van skerp goue stekels om die gesig wat wolke vuur in die vorm van paddastoele die lug in blaas; en naaste aan hulle 'n reusagtige swarte, meer akkedisagtig as enige van die ander.

'n Stuk of dertig towenaars, sewe of agt per draak, sukkel om hulle te beheer en hang aan die kettings wat aan swaar leerbande om hul nekke en bene vasgemaak is. Asof betower, kyk Harry op na waar hy die oë van die swart draak hoog bo hom kan sien. Dit het vertikale pupille soos 'n kat en die oë peul uit, van vrees of woede, hy weet nie mooi waarvan nie . . . maar dit maak 'n alleraaklike geraas, 'n gillende, tierende geskree . . .

“Val terug daar, Hagrid!” gil 'n toenaar naby die heining terwyl hy aan die ketting rem wat hy vashou. “Hulle kan vuur 'n goeie sewe meter ver spoeg, weet jy! Ek het hierdie Horingstert al twintig sien doen!”

“Is hulle nie pragtig nie?” sê Hagrid sag.

“Dit help nie!” gil nog 'n toenaar. “Bedwelmtowerspreuke, ek tel drie!”

Harry sien hoe al die draakoppassers hul towerstawwe uithaal.

“Benewel!” skreeu hulle in 'n koor sodat die Beneweltowerspreuke soos vuurpyle deur die duisternis skiet en in 'n stortreën van sterre teen die drake se skubberige velle oopbars –

Harry sien hoe die draak naaste aan hulle gevaarlik op sy agterpote steier, sy kake wyd oopgesper in 'n skielike, stille kreet; hoewel sy neusgate nog rook, kom daar glad nie meer vlamme uit nie. Toe, baie stadig, slaan dit neer – etlike tonne seningrige, skubberige swart draak tref die grond met 'n slag wat Harry kan sweer die bome agter hom laat kraak.

Die draakoppassers laat sak hul towerstawwe en stap na die gevalle drake wat elk so groot soos 'n kleinerige heuwel is. Hulle trek die kettings haastig stywer en maak hulle stewig aan ysterpale vas wat hulle met hul towerstawwe diep die grond in dryf.

“Wil jy van naby gaan kyk?” vra Hagrid opgewonde vir Madame Maxine. Die twee stap tot teen die heining en Harry loop agterna. Die toenaar wat Hagrid gewaarsku het om nie nader te kom nie, draai om en Harry besef wie dit is – Charlie Weasley.

“Is alles reg, Hagrid?” blaas hy toe hy nader stap om te kom gesels. “Hulle behoort nou oukei te wees – ons het hulle op pad hierheen met 'n Slaapdrankie ondergesit, gedink dit sal beter wees as hulle wakker word terwyl dit donker en stil is. Maar soos jy gesien het, is hulle nie alte tevrede nie, hoegenaamd nie tevrede nie –”

“Watter soorte het jy hier, Charlie?” vra Hagrid terwyl hy met iets soos

eerbied na die naaste draak – die swarte – kyk. Die ding se oë is nog half oop. Harry sien 'n geel glinstering onder die verrimpelde swart ooglid.

“Dis 'n Hongaarse Horingstert,” sê Charlie. “Daardie een daar oorkant is 'n Gewone Walliese Groene, dis nou die kleiner een; daardie grysbloue is 'n Sweedse Kortsnoet en die rooie is 'n Chinese Vuurbol.”

Charlie kyk om hom; Madame Maxine is besig om om die kamp te stap om die bedwelmdre drake beter te kan bekijk.

“Ek het nie geweet dat jy haar gaan bring nie, Hagrid,” sê Charlie fronsend. “Die kampioene is nie veronderstel om te weet wat op hulle wag nie – sy gaan mos vir haar student sê, of hoe?”

“Net gedink sy sal daarvan hou om hulle te sien,” sê Hagrid skouerophalend terwyl hy nog steeds asof betower na die drake staan.

“Baie romantiese afspraak, Hagrid,” sê Charlie en skud sy kop.

“Vier . . .” sê Hagrid, “daar is dus een vir elke kampioen, nê? Wat moet hulle doen – teen hulle veg?”

“Net verby hulle kom, dink ek,” sê Charlie. “Ons sal byderhand wees as dinge lelik raak, regstaan met blustowerspreuke. Hulle wou broeis moeders gehad het, ek weet nie hoekom nie . . . maar ek sal dit vir jou sê, ek beny nie die een wat die Horingstert kry nie. Gemene ding. Haar agterkant is net so gevaarlik soos haar voorkant, kyk.”

Charlie wys na die Horingstert se stert en Harry sien dat dit oortrek is met lang, bronskleurige stekels.

Op daardie oomblik kom vyf van Charlie se helpers steierend na die Horingstert aangestap met 'n broeisel granietgrys eiers tussen hulle op 'n kombers. Hulle sit die eiers versigtig langs die Horingstert neer. Hagrid uiter 'n verlangende kreet.

“Ek het hulle getel, Hagrid,” sê Charlie streng. Toe sê hy, “Hoe's Harry?”

“Oukei,” sê Hagrid wat nog steeds na die eiers staan.

“Hoop hy's nog oukei na hierdie affêre,” sê Charlie grimmig terwyl hy oor die drake se kamp staan. “Ek het dit nie durf waag om vir Ma te sê wat hy vir die eerste taak sal moet doen nie, sy wil klaar omtrent kleintjies kry oor hom . . .” Charlie boots sy ma se bekommerde stem na. “*Hoe kon hulle hom toelaat om vir daardie Toernooi in te skryf, hy's veels te jonk! Ek het gedink dat hulle veilig is, dat daar 'n ouderdomsperk gaan wees!*” Sy was in trane na daardie artikel oor hom in die *Daaglikse Profeet*. ‘Hy huil nog steeds oor sy ouers! O, die arme kind, het ek maar geweet!’”

Harry het genoeg gehad. Hy is redelik seker dat Hagrid hom nie gaan mis sien, nie terwyl hy attraksies soos vier drake en Madame Maxine het om hom besig te hou nie. Hy draai stilweg om en begin terugstap kasteel toe.

Hy weet nie of hy bly is dat hy gesien het wat op hom wag of nie. Dalk is dit tog beter so. Die eerste skok is verby. As hy die drake Dinsdag vir

die eerste keer moes sien, het hy voor die hele skool flou geval . . . heel moontlik sal hy nog steeds . . . hy gaan met sy towerstaf gewapen wees – wat nou soos niks meer as 'n smal stukkie hout voel nie – teen 'n vyftien meter hoë, skubberige, stekelrige, vuurspuwende draak. En hy moet verby die ding kom. Met almal wat kyk. *Hoe?*

Harry loop al vinniger om die kant van die Woud; hy het minder as 'n kwartier om by die vuurherd te kom waar hy met Sirius gaan praat en hy kan nie onthou of hy al ooit meer met iemand wou praat as juis nou nie. Toe, sonder waarskuwing, loop hy in iets vas wat baie solied is.

Harry slaan agteroor neer. Sy bril sit skeef, hy gryp die mantel om hom vas en lê doodstil terwyl hy na die donker buitelyn van die towenaar teen wie hy gebots het, staar. Hy herken die bokbaardjie dadelik . . . dit is Karkaroff.

“Wie's daar?” sê Karkaroff baie agterdogtig terwyl hy in die donkerte rondkyk. Harry bly doodstil lê. 'n Minuut of wat later lyk dit asof Karkaroff besluit het dat dit die een of ander dier was; hy kyk laag op die grond asof hy verwag om iets soos 'n hond te sien. Toe sluip hy weg tot tussen die bome en kies koers na waar die drake gehou word.

Harry kom baie stadig en baie versigtig orent en laat vat, so vinnig as wat sy bene hom kan dra en met so min moontlik geraas, in die donkerte Hogwarts toe.

Hy twyfel nie vir 'n oomblik waarmee Karkaroff besig is nie. Hy het van sy skip afgeglip om te probeer uitvind wat die eerste taak gaan wees. Dalk het hy vir Hagrid en Madame Maxine saam na die Woud sien loop – dis glad nie moeilik om hulle op 'n afstand te sien nie . . . en nou hoef Karkaroff bloot die geluid van stemme te volg en dan sal hy, net soos Madame Maxine, weet wat op die kampioene wag. Dit wil lyk asof Cedric die enigste kampioen gaan wees wat Dinsdag die onbekende gaan aandurf.

Dan is Harry by die kasteel, hy glip deur die voordeure en begin om die marmertappe uit te klim; hy is uitasem, maar kan dit nie waag om sy pas te verslap nie . . . hy het minder as vyf minute om by die kaggel te kom . . .

“Spekskiet!” sê hy hygend vir die Vet Vrou wat in haar raam voor die portretopening sit en slaap.

“As jy so sê,” mompel sy slaperig sonder om haar oë oop te maak en die prent swaai vorentoe om hom in te laat. Harry klim deur. Die geselskamer is verlate en te oordeel na die feit dat dit normaal ruik, was dit nie vir Hermien nodig om Misbomme te gooi om te sorg dat hy en Sirius privaat kan gesels nie.

Harry haal die onsigbaarheidsmantel af en gooi homself in 'n leunstoel voor die vuur neer. Die kamer is skemerdonker; die vlamme is die enigste bron van lig. Daar naby op 'n tafel glinster die *Ondersteun CEDRIC*

DIGGORY-wapens wat die Creevey-broers probeer verbeter het in die lig van die vuur. Hulle lees nou POTTER STINK ERG. Harry draai terug na die vlamme en wip van die skrik.

Sirius se kop sit in die vuur. As Harry nie gesien het toe mnr. Diggory presies dieselfde ding in die Weasleys se kombuis gedoen het nie, het hy hom boeglam geskrik. Pleks daarvan breek sy gesig oop in sy eerste glimlag in dae, hy klouter uit die stoel, hurk voor die vuur en sê, “Sirius – hoe gaan dit?”

Sirius lyk anders as wat Harry hom onthou. Toe hulle gegroet het, was Sirius se gesig hol en vervalte en omring deur ’n groot bos lang, gekoekte, swart hare – nou is sy hare kort en skoongewas, sy gesig is voller en hy lyk jonger, baie meer soos die enigste foto wat Harry van hom het, die een wat op die Potters se troue geneem is.

“Maak nie saak nie, hoe gaan dit met jou?” vra Sirius ernstig.

“Ek is –” Vir ’n oomblik wil Harry sê “oukei” – maar hy kan dit nie doen nie. Voor hy homself kan keer, praat hy meer as wat hy in dae gepraat het – hoe niemand hom wil glo dat hy homself nie vir die Toernooi ingeskryf het nie, hoe Rika Skinner oor hom in die *Daaglikse Profeet* gelieg het, hoe hy nie in die gange kan loop sonder dat iemand met hom die spot dryf nie – en oor Ron, Ron wat hom nie glo nie, Ron se jaloesie . . .

“. . . en nou het Hagrid so pas vir my gewys wat die eerste taak is en dis drake, Sirius, dis verby met my,” eindig hy desperaat.

Toe Sirius na hom kyk, is sy oë vol kommer, oë wat nog nie die uitdrukking wat Azkaban aan hulle gegee het, verloor het nie – daardie doodse, spookagtige uitdrukking. Hy het Harry laat uitpraat sonder om hom in die rede te val, maar nou sê hy, “Met drake kan ons ’n plan maak, Harry, maar ons sal netnou daaroor praat – ek het nie baie tyd nie . . . ek het by ’n towenaarshuis ingebreek om die vuur te gebruik en hulle kan enige oomblik terugkom. Daar is dinge waarteen ek jou moet waar-sku.”

“Wat?” sê Harry en hy voel hoe sy moed nog verder sak . . . daar kan tog nie erger dinge as drake wees wat op hom wag nie?

“Karkaroff,” sê Sirius. “Harry, hy was ’n Doodseter. Jy weet wat die Doodseters is, nê?”

“Ja – hy – wat?”

“Hy was gevang, hy was in Azkaban saam met my, maar hy’s vrygelaat. Ek sal enigiets wed dat dit die rede is waarom Dompeldorius vanjaar ’n Auror by Hogwarts wou hê – om hom in die oog te hou. Moodie het vir Karkaroff gevang. Dis hy wat hom in Azkaban laat beland het.”

“Karkaroff is vrygelaat?” sê Harry stadig – dis asof sy brein sukkel om verdere skokkende inligting te verwerk. “Hoekom het hulle hom vrygelaat?”

“Hy het ’n ooreenkoms met die Ministerie vir Towerkuns aangegaan,”

sê Sirius bitter. “Hy het gesê dat hy insien hoe verkeerd hy was en toe het hy name genoem . . . hy het ’n klomp ander mense in die tronk laat beland . . . hy’s glad nie gewild daar binne nie, laat ek jou dit vertel. En sover ek weet, onderrig hy elke student in daardie skool van hom in die Donker Kunste sedert hy uit is. Wees maar in jou pasoppens vir Durmstrang se kampioen ook.”

“Goed,” sê Harry stadig. “Maar . . . probeer jy sê dat Karkaroff my naam in die Beker gesit het? Want as dit hy was, is hy ’n hengse goeie akteur. Dit het gelyk asof hy woedend was. Hy wou nie hê dat ek moet deelneem nie.”

“Ons weet dat hy ’n goeie akteur is,” sê Sirius, “hy het die Ministerie vir Towerkuns oorreed om hom vry te laat, dan nie? Ek hou ook ’n ogie op daardie *Daaglikse Profeet*, Harry –”

“Jy en die res van die wêreld,” sê Harry bitter.

– en as ek daardie Skinner-vroumens se artikel tussen die reëls lees, blyk dit dat Moodie die nag voor hy by Hogwarts begin het, aangeval is. Ja, ek weet sy sê dit was net nog ’n vals alarm,” sê Sirius vinnig toe hy sien dat Harry op die punt is om iets te sê, “maar ek dink nie so nie. Ek dink iemand wou keer dat hy Hogwarts toe kom. Ek dink iemand weet dat dit baie moeilik gaan wees om hul werk te doen as hy in die rondte is. En niemand gaan dit nou juis vreeslik deeglik ondersoek nie, want Maloog het al te dikwels allerhande indringers gehoor. Dit beteken egter nie dat hy die ware Jakob nie kan raak sien nie. Moodie was die beste Auror wat die Ministerie nog ooit gehad het.”

“Wat . . . wat sê jy nou eintlik?” sê Harry stadig. “Dat Karkaroff my wil doodmaak? Maar – hoekom?”

Sirius aarsel.

“Ek het allerhande snaakse dinge gehoor,” sê hy stadig. “Die Doodseters is die laaste tyd baie meer aktief as tevore. Hulle het hulself by die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker geopenbaar, nie waar nie? Iemand het die Donker Merk die lug ingestuur . . . en toe – het jy van daardie heks van die Ministerie vir Towerkuns gehoor? Die een wat verdwyn het?”

“Bertha Jurgens?” sê Harry.

“Presies . . . sy het in Albanië verdwyn en dit is net mooi waar Woldemort laas gesien is . . . en sy sou tog geweet het dat die Drietowenaars-toernooi beplan word, nè?”

“Ja, maar . . . wat’s die kans dat sy haar nou juis in die heer Woldemort sou vasloop?” vra Harry.

“Luister, ek ken vir Bertha Jurgens,” sê Sirius grimmig. “Sy was by Hogwarts toe ek daar was, ’n paar jaar voor my en jou pa. En sy was ’n idioot. Verskriklik nuuskierig, maar geen verstand nie, absoluut niks. Dis nie ’n goeie kombinasie nie, Harry. Ek sou sê dat dit baie maklik sou wees om haar in ’n lokval te lei.”

“Dan . . . dan kon Woldemort oor die Toernooi uitgevind het?” sê Harry. “Is dit wat jy bedoel? Dink jy dat Karkaroff hier is omdat hy hom beveel het?”

“Ek weet nie,” sê Sirius stadig, “ek weet nie . . . Karkaroff lyk nie vir my na die tipe wat na Woldemort sal teruggaan tensy hy weet dat Woldemort sterk genoeg is om hom te beskerm nie. Maar wie ook al jou naam in daardie Beker gesit het, het dit vir ’n rede gedoen en ek kan nie anders as om te dink dat die Toernooi ’n baie goeie manier is om jou aan te val en dit na ’n ongeluk te laat lyk nie.”

“Lyk vir my soos ’n baie goeie plan,” sê Harry somber. “Hulle hoef net terug te staan en alles aan daardie drake oor te laat.”

“Goed – daardie drake,” sê Sirius, wat nou baie vinnig praat. “Daar is ’n manier, Harry. Moenie in die versoeking kom om ’n Bedwelmtowerspreuk te gebruik nie – drake is te sterk en het te veel towermagte om deur ’n enkele Bedwelmer uitgeslaan te word. Jy het omtrent ’n halfdosyn towenaars op ’n slag nodig as jy ’n draak –”

“Ja, ek weet, ek het gesien,” sê Harry.

“Maar jy kan dit op jou eie doen,” sê Sirius. “Daar is ’n manier. Al wat jy nodig het, is ’n baie eenvoudige towerspreuk. Jy moet net –”

Maar Harry hou sy hand op om hom stil te maak, sy hart klop skielik so erg dat dit voel of dit gaan ontplof. Hy het voetstappe agter hom op die wenteltrap gehoor.

“Gaan!” fluister hy vir Sirius. “Gaan! Daar kom iemand!”

Harry skarrel orent en gaan staan voor die vuur – as iemand Sirius se gesig binne Hogwarts se mure moet sien, sal daar ’n vreeslike bohaai wees – die Ministerie sal ingesleep word – hy, Harry, sal oor Sirius se bewegings uitgevra word –

Harry hoor ’n ligte plofgeluid in die vuur agter hom en besef dat Sirius weg is – hy staar na die onderpunt van die wenteltrap – wie het besluit om eenuur in die oggend te gaan rondloop en in die proses vir Sirius gekeer net toe hy vir Harry wou sê hoe om verby die draak te kom?

Dit is Ron. Hy dra sy maroen paisleypajamas en steek in sy spore vas toe hy Harry aan die ander kant van die vertrek sien staan. Hy kyk om hom rond.

“Met wie het jy gepraat?” vra hy.

“Wat het dit met jou uit te waai?” jak Harry hom af. “Wat maak jy hierdie tyd van die nag hier onder?”

“Ek het net gewonder waar jy –” Ron word stil en haal sy skouers op. “Niks. Ek gaan maar weer slaap.”

“Net gedink jy sal ’n bietjie kom rondsnuffel, hè?” skree Harry. Hy weet dat Ron nie ’n idee het wat hy onderbreek het nie, weet dat hy dit nie aspris gedoen het nie, maar dit traak hom net mooi niks – op hierdie

oomblik haat hy alles aan Ron, van bo tot heel onder by die paar sentimeter kaal enkels wat by sy pajamabroek uitsteek.

“Jammer daaroor,” sê Ron en sy gesig word rooi van woede. “Moet geweet het dat jy nie gesteur sal wil wees nie. Sal jou uitlos sodat jy jou in vrede vir jou volgende onderhoud kan voorberei.”

Harry gryp een van die *POTTER STINK ERG*-wapens van die tafel af en gooi dit so hard as wat hy kan oor die vertrek. Dit tref Ron teen die voorkop en bons eenkant toe.

“Vat so,” sê Harry. “Iets wat jy Dinsdag kan dra. Dalk het jy ook nou ’n litteken as jy gelukkig is . . . dis mos wat jy wil hê, nè?”

Hy stap deur die vertrek na die trappe; hy verwag half dat Ron hom gaan keer, hy sal eintlik daarvan hou as Ron hom probeer foeter, maar Ron staan net daar in sy te klein pajamas. Harry lê lank nadat hy boon-toe gestorm het nog in sy bed en broei, maar hy hoor nie toe Ron bed toe kom nie.

CHAPTER TWENTY



THE FIRST TASK

Harry got up on Sunday morning and dressed so inattentively that it was a while before he realized he was trying to pull his hat onto his foot instead of his sock. When he'd finally got all his clothes on the right parts of his body, he hurried off to find Hermione, locating her at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall, where she was eating breakfast with Ginny. Feeling too queasy to eat, Harry waited until Hermione had swallowed her last spoonful of porridge, then dragged her out onto the grounds. There, he told her all about the dragons, and about everything Sirius had said, while they took another long walk around the lake.

Alarmed as she was by Sirius's warnings about Karkaroff, Hermione still thought that the dragons were the more pressing

problem.

“Let’s just try and keep you alive until Tuesday evening,” she said desperately, “and then we can worry about Karkaroff.”

They walked three times around the lake, trying all the way to think of a simple spell that would subdue a dragon. Nothing whatsoever occurred to them, so they retired to the library instead. Here, Harry pulled down every book he could find on dragons, and both of them set to work searching through the large pile.

“‘*Talon-clipping by charms . . . treating scale-rot . . .*’ This is no good, this is for nutters like Hagrid who want to keep them healthy. . . .”

“‘*Dragons are extremely difficult to slay, owing to the ancient magic that imbues their thick hides, which none but the most powerful spells can penetrate . . .*’ But Sirius said a simple one would do it. . . .”

“Let’s try some simple spellbooks, then,” said Harry, throwing aside *Men Who Love Dragons Too Much*.

He returned to the table with a pile of spellbooks, set them down, and began to flick through each in turn, Hermione whispering nonstop at his elbow.

“Well, there are Switching Spells . . . but what’s the point of Switching it? Unless you swapped its fangs for wine-gums or something that would make it less dangerous. . . . The trouble is, like that book said, not much is going to get through a dragon’s hide. . . . I’d say Transfigure it, but something that big, you really haven’t got a hope, I doubt even Professor McGonagall . . . unless you’re supposed to put the spell on *yourself*? Maybe to give yourself extra powers?

But *they're* not simple spells, I mean, we haven't done any of those in class, I only know about them because I've been doing O.W.L. practice papers. . . .”

“Hermione,” Harry said, through gritted teeth, “will you shut up for a bit, please? I'm trying to concentrate.”

But all that happened, when Hermione fell silent, was that Harry's brain filled with a sort of blank buzzing, which didn't seem to allow room for concentration. He stared hopelessly down the index of *Basic Hexes for the Busy and Vexed. Instant scalping* . . . but dragons had no hair . . . *pepper breath* . . . that would probably increase a dragon's firepower . . . *horn tongue* . . . just what he needed, to give it an extra weapon . . .

“Oh no, he's back *again*, why can't he read on his stupid ship?” said Hermione irritably as Viktor Krum slouched in, cast a surly look over at the pair of them, and settled himself in a distant corner with a pile of books. “Come on, Harry, we'll go back to the common room . . . his fan club'll be here in a moment, twittering away. . . .”

And sure enough, as they left the library, a gang of girls tiptoed past them, one of them wearing a Bulgaria scarf tied around her waist.

Harry barely slept that night. When he awoke on Monday morning, he seriously considered for the first time ever just running away from Hogwarts. But as he looked around the Great Hall at breakfast time, and thought about what leaving the castle would mean, he knew he couldn't do it. It was the only place he had ever been happy . . . well, he supposed he must have been happy with his parents too, but he

couldn't remember that.

Somehow, the knowledge that he would rather be here and facing a dragon than back on Privet Drive with Dudley was good to know; it made him feel slightly calmer. He finished his bacon with difficulty (his throat wasn't working too well), and as he and Hermione got up, he saw Cedric Diggory leaving the Hufflepuff table.

Cedric still didn't know about the dragons . . . the only champion who didn't, if Harry was right in thinking that Maxime and Karkaroff would have told Fleur and Krum. . . .

"Hermione, I'll see you in the greenhouses," Harry said, coming to his decision as he watched Cedric leaving the Hall. "Go on, I'll catch you up."

"Harry, you'll be late, the bell's about to ring —"

"I'll catch you up, okay?"

By the time Harry reached the bottom of the marble staircase, Cedric was at the top. He was with a load of sixth-year friends. Harry didn't want to talk to Cedric in front of them; they were among those who had been quoting Rita Skeeter's article at him every time he went near them. He followed Cedric at a distance and saw that he was heading toward the Charms corridor. This gave Harry an idea. Pausing at a distance from them, he pulled out his wand, and took careful aim.

"Diffindo!"

Cedric's bag split. Parchment, quills, and books spilled out of it onto the floor. Several bottles of ink smashed.

"Don't bother," said Cedric in an exasperated voice as his friends bent down to help him. "Tell Flitwick I'm coming, go on. . . ."

This was exactly what Harry had been hoping for. He slipped his wand back into his robes, waited until Cedric's friends had disappeared into their classroom, and hurried up the corridor, which was now empty of everyone but himself and Cedric.

"Hi," said Cedric, picking up a copy of *A Guide to Advanced Transfiguration* that was now splattered with ink. "My bag just split . . . brand-new and all . . ."

"Cedric," said Harry, "the first task is dragons."

"What?" said Cedric, looking up.

"Dragons," said Harry, speaking quickly, in case Professor Flitwick came out to see where Cedric had got to. "They've got four, one for each of us, and we've got to get past them."

Cedric stared at him. Harry saw some of the panic he'd been feeling since Saturday night flickering in Cedric's gray eyes.

"Are you sure?" Cedric said in a hushed voice.

"Dead sure," said Harry. "I've seen them."

"But how did you find out? We're not supposed to know. . . ."

"Never mind," said Harry quickly — he knew Hagrid would be in trouble if he told the truth. "But I'm not the only one who knows. Fleur and Krum will know by now — Maxime and Karkaroff both saw the dragons too."

Cedric straightened up, his arms full of inky quills, parchment, and books, his ripped bag dangling off one shoulder. He stared at Harry, and there was a puzzled, almost suspicious look in his eyes.

"Why are you telling me?" he asked.

Harry looked at him in disbelief. He was sure Cedric wouldn't have asked that if he had seen the dragons himself. Harry wouldn't

have let his worst enemy face those monsters unprepared — well, perhaps Malfoy or Snape . . .

“It’s just . . . fair, isn’t it?” he said to Cedric. “We all know now . . . we’re on an even footing, aren’t we?”

Cedric was still looking at him in a slightly suspicious way when Harry heard a familiar clunking noise behind him. He turned around and saw Mad-Eye Moody emerging from a nearby classroom.

“Come with me, Potter,” he growled. “Diggory, off you go.”

Harry stared apprehensively at Moody. Had he overheard them?

“Er — Professor, I’m supposed to be in Herbology —”

“Never mind that, Potter. In my office, please. . . .”

Harry followed him, wondering what was going to happen to him now. What if Moody wanted to know how he’d found out about the dragons? Would Moody go to Dumbledore and tell on Hagrid, or just turn Harry into a ferret? Well, it might be easier to get past a dragon if he were a ferret, Harry thought dully, he’d be smaller, much less easy to see from a height of fifty feet . . .

He followed Moody into his office. Moody closed the door behind them and turned to look at Harry, his magical eye fixed upon him as well as the normal one.

“That was a very decent thing you just did, Potter,” Moody said quietly.

Harry didn’t know what to say; this wasn’t the reaction he had expected at all.

“Sit down,” said Moody, and Harry sat, looking around.

He had visited this office under two of its previous occupants. In Professor Lockhart’s day, the walls had been plastered with beaming,

winking pictures of Professor Lockhart himself. When Lupin had lived here, you were more likely to come across a specimen of some fascinating new Dark creature he had procured for them to study in class. Now, however, the office was full of a number of exceptionally odd objects that Harry supposed Moody had used in the days when he had been an Auror.

On his desk stood what looked like a large, cracked, glass spinning top; Harry recognized it at once as a Sneakoscope, because he owned one himself, though it was much smaller than Moody's. In the corner on a small table stood an object that looked something like an extra-squiggly, golden television aerial. It was humming slightly. What appeared to be a mirror hung opposite Harry on the wall, but it was not reflecting the room. Shadowy figures were moving around inside it, none of them clearly in focus.

"Like my Dark Detectors, do you?" said Moody, who was watching Harry closely.

"What's that?" Harry asked, pointing at the squiggly golden aerial.

"Secrecy Sensor. Vibrates when it detects concealment and lies . . . no use here, of course, too much interference — students in every direction lying about why they haven't done their homework. Been humming ever since I got here. I had to disable my Sneakoscope because it wouldn't stop whistling. It's extra-sensitive, picks up stuff about a mile around. Of course, it could be picking up more than kid stuff," he added in a growl.

"And what's the mirror for?"

"Oh that's my Foe-Glass. See them out there, skulking around? I'm not really in trouble until I see the whites of their eyes. That's when I

open my trunk.”

He let out a short, harsh laugh, and pointed to the large trunk under the window. It had seven keyholes in a row. Harry wondered what was in there, until Moody’s next question brought him sharply back to earth.

“So . . . found out about the dragons, have you?”

Harry hesitated. He’d been afraid of this — but he hadn’t told Cedric, and he certainly wasn’t going to tell Moody, that Hagrid had broken the rules.

“It’s all right,” said Moody, sitting down and stretching out his wooden leg with a groan. “Cheating’s a traditional part of the Triwizard Tournament and always has been.”

“I didn’t cheat,” said Harry sharply. “It was — a sort of accident that I found out.”

Moody grinned. “I wasn’t accusing you, laddie. I’ve been telling Dumbledore from the start, he can be as high-minded as he likes, but you can bet old Karkaroff and Maxime won’t be. They’ll have told their champions everything they can. They want to win. They want to beat Dumbledore. They’d like to prove he’s only human.”

Moody gave another harsh laugh, and his magical eye swiveled around so fast it made Harry feel queasy to watch it.

“So . . . got any ideas how you’re going to get past your dragon yet?” said Moody.

“No,” said Harry.

“Well, I’m not going to tell you,” said Moody gruffly. “I don’t show favoritism, me. I’m just going to give you some good, general advice. And the first bit is — *play to your strengths.*”

“I haven’t got any,” said Harry, before he could stop himself.

“Excuse me,” growled Moody, “you’ve got strengths if I say you’ve got them. Think now. What are you best at?”

Harry tried to concentrate. What *was* he best at? Well, that was easy, really —

“Quidditch,” he said dully, “and a fat lot of help —”

“That’s right,” said Moody, staring at him very hard, his magical eye barely moving at all. “You’re a damn good flier from what I’ve heard.”

“Yeah, but . . .” Harry stared at him. “I’m not allowed a broom, I’ve only got my wand —”

“My second piece of general advice,” said Moody loudly, interrupting him, “is to use a nice, simple spell that will enable you to *get what you need*.”

Harry looked at him blankly. What did he need?

“Come on, boy . . .” whispered Moody. “Put them together . . . it’s not that difficult. . . .”

And it clicked. He was best at flying. He needed to pass the dragon in the air. For that, he needed his Firebolt. And for his Firebolt, he needed —

“Hermione,” Harry whispered, when he had sped into the greenhouse three minutes later, uttering a hurried apology to Professor Sprout as he passed her. “Hermione — I need you to help me.”

“What d’you think I’ve been trying to do, Harry?” she whispered back, her eyes round with anxiety over the top of the quivering Flutterby Bush she was pruning.

“Hermione, I need to learn how to do a Summoning Charm properly by tomorrow afternoon.”

And so they practiced. They didn’t have lunch, but headed for a free classroom, where Harry tried with all his might to make various objects fly across the room toward him. He was still having problems. The books and quills kept losing heart halfway across the room and dropping like stones to the floor.

“Concentrate, Harry, *concentrate*. . . .”

“What d’you think I’m trying to do?” said Harry angrily. “A great big dragon keeps popping up in my head for some reason. . . . Okay, try again. . . .”

He wanted to skip Divination to keep practicing, but Hermione refused point-blank to skive off Arithmancy, and there was no point in staying without her. He therefore had to endure over an hour of Professor Trelawney, who spent half the lesson telling everyone that the position of Mars with relation to Saturn at that moment meant that people born in July were in great danger of sudden, violent deaths.

“Well, that’s good,” said Harry loudly, his temper getting the better of him, “just as long as it’s not drawn-out. I don’t want to suffer.”

Ron looked for a moment as though he was going to laugh; he certainly caught Harry’s eye for the first time in days, but Harry was still feeling too resentful toward Ron to care. He spent the rest of the lesson trying to attract small objects toward him under the table with his wand. He managed to make a fly zoom straight into his hand, though he wasn’t entirely sure that was his prowess at Summoning Charms — perhaps the fly was just stupid.

He forced down some dinner after Divination, then returned to the empty classroom with Hermione, using the Invisibility Cloak to avoid the teachers. They kept practicing until past midnight. They would have stayed longer, but Peeves turned up and, pretending to think that Harry wanted things thrown at him, started chucking chairs across the room. Harry and Hermione left in a hurry before the noise attracted Filch, and went back to the Gryffindor common room, which was now mercifully empty.

At two o'clock in the morning, Harry stood near the fireplace, surrounded by heaps of objects: books, quills, several upturned chairs, an old set of Gobstones, and Neville's toad, Trevor. Only in the last hour had Harry really got the hang of the Summoning Charm.

"That's better, Harry, that's loads better," Hermione said, looking exhausted but very pleased.

"Well, now we know what to do next time I can't manage a spell," Harry said, throwing a rune dictionary back to Hermione, so he could try again, "threaten me with a dragon. Right . . ." He raised his wand once more. "*Accio Dictionary!*"

The heavy book soared out of Hermione's hand, flew across the room, and Harry caught it.

"Harry, I really think you've got it!" said Hermione delightedly.

"Just as long as it works tomorrow," Harry said. "The Firebolt's going to be much farther away than the stuff in here, it's going to be in the castle, and I'm going to be out there on the grounds. . . ."

"That doesn't matter," said Hermione firmly. "Just as long as you're concentrating really, really hard on it, it'll come. Harry, we'd better get some sleep . . . you're going to need it."

Harry had been focusing so hard on learning the Summoning Charm that evening that some of his blind panic had left him. It returned in full measure, however, on the following morning. The atmosphere in the school was one of great tension and excitement. Lessons were to stop at midday, giving all the students time to get down to the dragons' enclosure — though of course, they didn't yet know what they would find there.

Harry felt oddly separate from everyone around him, whether they were wishing him good luck or hissing "*We'll have a box of tissues ready, Potter*" as he passed. It was a state of nervousness so advanced that he wondered whether he mightn't just lose his head when they tried to lead him out to his dragon, and start trying to curse everyone in sight. Time was behaving in a more peculiar fashion than ever, rushing past in great dollops, so that one moment he seemed to be sitting down in his first lesson, History of Magic, and the next, walking into lunch . . . and then (where had the morning gone? the last of the dragon-free hours?), Professor McGonagall was hurrying over to him in the Great Hall. Lots of people were watching.

"Potter, the champions have to come down onto the grounds now. . . . You have to get ready for your first task."

"Okay," said Harry, standing up, his fork falling onto his plate with a clatter.

"Good luck, Harry," Hermione whispered. "You'll be fine!"

"Yeah," said Harry in a voice that was most unlike his own.

He left the Great Hall with Professor McGonagall. She didn't seem herself either; in fact, she looked nearly as anxious as Hermione. As she walked him down the stone steps and out into the

cold November afternoon, she put her hand on his shoulder.

“Now, don’t panic,” she said, “just keep a cool head. . . . We’ve got wizards standing by to control the situation if it gets out of hand. . . . The main thing is just to do your best, and nobody will think any the worse of you. . . . Are you all right?”

“Yes,” Harry heard himself say. “Yes, I’m fine.”

She was leading him toward the place where the dragons were, around the edge of the forest, but when they approached the clump of trees behind which the enclosure would be clearly visible, Harry saw that a tent had been erected, its entrance facing them, screening the dragons from view.

“You’re to go in here with the other champions,” said Professor McGonagall, in a rather shaky sort of voice, “and wait for your turn, Potter. Mr. Bagman is in there . . . he’ll be telling you the — the procedure. . . . Good luck.”

“Thanks,” said Harry, in a flat, distant voice. She left him at the entrance of the tent. Harry went inside.

Fleur Delacour was sitting in a corner on a low wooden stool. She didn’t look nearly as composed as usual, but rather pale and clammy. Viktor Krum looked even surlier than usual, which Harry supposed was his way of showing nerves. Cedric was pacing up and down. When Harry entered, Cedric gave him a small smile, which Harry returned, feeling the muscles in his face working rather hard, as though they had forgotten how to do it.

“Harry! Good-o!” said Bagman happily, looking around at him. “Come in, come in, make yourself at home!”

Bagman looked somehow like a slightly overblown cartoon figure,

standing amid all the pale-faced champions. He was wearing his old Wasp robes again.

“Well, now we’re all here — time to fill you in!” said Bagman brightly. “When the audience has assembled, I’m going to be offering each of you this bag” — he held up a small sack of purple silk and shook it at them — “from which you will each select a small model of the thing you are about to face! There are different — er — varieties, you see. And I have to tell you something else too . . . ah, yes . . . your task is to *collect the golden egg!*”

Harry glanced around. Cedric had nodded once, to show that he understood Bagman’s words, and then started pacing around the tent again; he looked slightly green. Fleur Delacour and Krum hadn’t reacted at all. Perhaps they thought they might be sick if they opened their mouths; that was certainly how Harry felt. But they, at least, had volunteered for this. . . .

And in no time at all, hundreds upon hundreds of pairs of feet could be heard passing the tent, their owners talking excitedly, laughing, joking. . . . Harry felt as separate from the crowd as though they were a different species. And then — it seemed like about a second later to Harry — Bagman was opening the neck of the purple silk sack.

“Ladies first,” he said, offering it to Fleur Delacour.

She put a shaking hand inside the bag and drew out a tiny, perfect model of a dragon — a Welsh Green. It had the number two around its neck. And Harry knew, by the fact that Fleur showed no sign of surprise, but rather a determined resignation, that he had been right: Madame Maxime had told her what was coming.

The same held true for Krum. He pulled out the scarlet Chinese Fireball. It had a number three around its neck. He didn't even blink, just sat back down and stared at the ground.

Cedric put his hand into the bag, and out came the blueish-gray Swedish Short-Snout, the number one tied around its neck. Knowing what was left, Harry put his hand into the silk bag and pulled out the Hungarian Horntail, and the number four. It stretched its wings as he looked down at it, and bared its minuscule fangs.

"Well, there you are!" said Bagman. "You have each pulled out the dragon you will face, and the numbers refer to the order in which you are to take on the dragons, do you see? Now, I'm going to have to leave you in a moment, because I'm commentating. Mr. Diggory, you're first, just go out into the enclosure when you hear a whistle, all right? Now . . . Harry . . . could I have a quick word? Outside?"

"Er . . . yes," said Harry blankly, and he got up and went out of the tent with Bagman, who walked him a short distance away, into the trees, and then turned to him with a fatherly expression on his face.

"Feeling all right, Harry? Anything I can get you?"

"What?" said Harry. "I — no, nothing."

"Got a plan?" said Bagman, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "Because I don't mind sharing a few pointers, if you'd like them, you know. I mean," Bagman continued, lowering his voice still further, "you're the underdog here, Harry. . . . Anything I can do to help . . ."

"No," said Harry so quickly he knew he had sounded rude, "no — I — I know what I'm going to do, thanks."

"Nobody would *know*, Harry," said Bagman, winking at him.

"No, I'm fine," said Harry, wondering why he kept telling people

this, and wondering whether he had ever been less fine. “I’ve got a plan worked out, I —”

A whistle had blown somewhere.

“Good lord, I’ve got to run!” said Bagman in alarm, and he hurried off.

Harry walked back to the tent and saw Cedric emerging from it, greener than ever. Harry tried to wish him luck as he walked past, but all that came out of his mouth was a sort of hoarse grunt.

Harry went back inside to Fleur and Krum. Seconds later, they heard the roar of the crowd, which meant Cedric had entered the enclosure and was now face-to-face with the living counterpart of his model. . . .

It was worse than Harry could ever have imagined, sitting there and listening. The crowd screamed . . . yelled . . . gasped like a single many-headed entity, as Cedric did whatever he was doing to get past the Swedish Short-Snout. Krum was still staring at the ground. Fleur had now taken to retracing Cedric’s steps, around and around the tent. And Bagman’s commentary made everything much, much worse. . . . Horrible pictures formed in Harry’s mind as he heard: “Oooh, narrow miss there, very narrow” . . . “He’s taking risks, this one!” . . . “*Clever* move — pity it didn’t work!”

And then, after about fifteen minutes, Harry heard the deafening roar that could mean only one thing: Cedric had gotten past his dragon and captured the golden egg.

“Very good indeed!” Bagman was shouting. “And now the marks from the judges!”

But he didn’t shout out the marks; Harry supposed the judges were

holding them up and showing them to the crowd.

“One down, three to go!” Bagman yelled as the whistle blew again. “Miss Delacour, if you please!”

Fleur was trembling from head to foot; Harry felt more warmly toward her than he had done so far as she left the tent with her head held high and her hand clutching her wand. He and Krum were left alone, at opposite sides of the tent, avoiding each other’s gaze.

The same process started again. . . . “Oh I’m not sure that was wise!” they could hear Bagman shouting gleefully. “Oh . . . nearly! Careful now . . . good lord, I thought she’d had it then!”

Ten minutes later, Harry heard the crowd erupt into applause once more. . . . Fleur must have been successful too. A pause, while Fleur’s marks were being shown . . . more clapping . . . then, for the third time, the whistle.

“And here comes Mr. Krum!” cried Bagman, and Krum slouched out, leaving Harry quite alone.

He felt much more aware of his body than usual; very aware of the way his heart was pumping fast, and his fingers tingling with fear . . . yet at the same time, he seemed to be outside himself, seeing the walls of the tent, and hearing the crowd, as though from far away. . . .

“Very daring!” Bagman was yelling, and Harry heard the Chinese Fireball emit a horrible, roaring shriek, while the crowd drew its collective breath. “That’s some nerve he’s showing — and — yes, he’s got the egg!”

Applause shattered the wintry air like breaking glass; Krum had finished — it would be Harry’s turn any moment.

He stood up, noticing dimly that his legs seemed to be made of

marshmallow. He waited. And then he heard the whistle blow. He walked out through the entrance of the tent, the panic rising into a crescendo inside him. And now he was walking past the trees, through a gap in the enclosure fence.

He saw everything in front of him as though it was a very highly colored dream. There were hundreds and hundreds of faces staring down at him from stands that had been magicked there since he'd last stood on this spot. And there was the Horntail, at the other end of the enclosure, crouched low over her clutch of eggs, her wings half-furled, her evil, yellow eyes upon him, a monstrous, scaly, black lizard, thrashing her spiked tail, leaving yard-long gouge marks in the hard ground. The crowd was making a great deal of noise, but whether friendly or not, Harry didn't know or care. It was time to do what he had to do . . . to focus his mind, entirely and absolutely, upon the thing that was his only chance. . . .

He raised his wand.

"Accio Firebolt!" he shouted.

Harry waited, every fiber of him hoping, praying. . . . If it hadn't worked . . . if it wasn't coming . . . He seemed to be looking at everything around him through some sort of shimmering, transparent barrier, like a heat haze, which made the enclosure and the hundreds of faces around him swim strangely. . . .

And then he heard it, speeding through the air behind him; he turned and saw his Firebolt hurtling toward him around the edge of the woods, soaring into the enclosure, and stopping dead in midair beside him, waiting for him to mount. The crowd was making even more noise. . . . Bagman was shouting something . . . but Harry's ears

were not working properly anymore . . . listening wasn't important. . . .

He swung his leg over the broom and kicked off from the ground. And a second later, something miraculous happened. . . .

As he soared upward, as the wind rushed through his hair, as the crowd's faces became mere flesh-colored pinpricks below, and the Horntail shrank to the size of a dog, he realized that he had left not only the ground behind, but also his fear. . . . He was back where he belonged. . . .

This was just another Quidditch match, that was all . . . just another Quidditch match, and that Horntail was just another ugly opposing team. . . .

He looked down at the clutch of eggs and spotted the gold one, gleaming against its cement-colored fellows, residing safely between the dragon's front legs. "Okay," Harry told himself, "diversionary tactics . . . let's go. . . ."

He dived. The Horntail's head followed him; he knew what it was going to do and pulled out of the dive just in time; a jet of fire had been released exactly where he would have been had he not swerved away . . . but Harry didn't care . . . that was no more than dodging a Bludger. . . .

"Great Scott, he can fly!" yelled Bagman as the crowd shrieked and gasped. "Are you watching this, Mr. Krum?"

Harry soared higher in a circle; the Horntail was still following his progress; its head revolving on its long neck — if he kept this up, it would be nicely dizzy — but better not push it too long, or it would be breathing fire again —

Harry plummeted just as the Horntail opened its mouth, but this time he was less lucky — he missed the flames, but the tail came whipping up to meet him instead, and as he swerved to the left, one of the long spikes grazed his shoulder, ripping his robes —

He could feel it stinging, he could hear screaming and groans from the crowd, but the cut didn't seem to be deep. . . . Now he zoomed around the back of the Horntail, and a possibility occurred to him . . .

The Horntail didn't seem to want to take off, she was too protective of her eggs. Though she writhed and twisted, furling and unfurling her wings and keeping those fearsome yellow eyes on Harry, she was afraid to move too far from them . . . but he had to persuade her to do it, or he'd never get near them. . . . The trick was to do it carefully, gradually. . . .

He began to fly, first this way, then the other, not near enough to make her breathe fire to stave him off, but still posing a sufficient threat to ensure she kept her eyes on him. Her head swayed this way and that, watching him out of those vertical pupils, her fangs bared. . . .

He flew higher. The Horntail's head rose with him, her neck now stretched to its fullest extent, still swaying, like a snake before its charmer. . . .

Harry rose a few more feet, and she let out a roar of exasperation. He was like a fly to her, a fly she was longing to swat; her tail thrashed again, but he was too high to reach now. . . . She shot fire into the air, which he dodged. . . . Her jaws opened wide. . . .

“Come on,” Harry hissed, swerving tantalizingly above her, “come

on, come and get me . . . up you get now . . .”

And then she reared, spreading her great, black, leathery wings at last, as wide as those of a small airplane — and Harry dived. Before the dragon knew what he had done, or where he had disappeared to, he was speeding toward the ground as fast as he could go, toward the eggs now unprotected by her clawed front legs — he had taken his hands off his Firebolt — he had seized the golden egg —

And with a huge spurt of speed, he was off, he was soaring out over the stands, the heavy egg safely under his uninjured arm, and it was as though somebody had just turned the volume back up — for the first time, he became properly aware of the noise of the crowd, which was screaming and applauding as loudly as the Irish supporters at the World Cup —

“Look at that!” Bagman was yelling. “Will you look at that! Our youngest champion is quickest to get his egg! Well, this is going to shorten the odds on Mr. Potter!”

Harry saw the dragon keepers rushing forward to subdue the Horntail, and, over at the entrance to the enclosure, Professor McGonagall, Professor Moody, and Hagrid hurrying to meet him, all of them waving him toward them, their smiles evident even from this distance. He flew back over the stands, the noise of the crowd pounding his eardrums, and came in smoothly to land, his heart lighter than it had been in weeks. . . . He had got through the first task, he had survived. . . .

“That was excellent, Potter!” cried Professor McGonagall as he got off the Firebolt — which from her was extravagant praise. He noticed that her hand shook as she pointed at his shoulder. “You’ll

need to see Madam Pomfrey before the judges give out your score. . . . Over there, she's had to mop up Diggory already. . . .”

“Yeh did it, Harry!” said Hagrid hoarsely. “Yeh did it! An’ agains’ the Horntail an’ all, an’ yeh know Charlie said that was the wors’ —”

“Thanks, Hagrid,” said Harry loudly, so that Hagrid wouldn’t blunder on and reveal that he had shown Harry the dragons beforehand.

Professor Moody looked very pleased too; his magical eye was dancing in its socket.

“Nice and easy does the trick, Potter,” he growled.

“Right then, Potter, the first aid tent, please . . .” said Professor McGonagall.

Harry walked out of the enclosure, still panting, and saw Madam Pomfrey standing at the mouth of a second tent, looking worried.

“Dragons!” she said, in a disgusted tone, pulling Harry inside. The tent was divided into cubicles; he could make out Cedric’s shadow through the canvas, but Cedric didn’t seem to be badly injured; he was sitting up, at least. Madam Pomfrey examined Harry’s shoulder, talking furiously all the while. “Last year dementors, this year dragons, what are they going to bring into this school next? You’re very lucky . . . this is quite shallow . . . it’ll need cleaning before I heal it up, though. . . .”

She cleaned the cut with a dab of some purple liquid that smoked and stung, but then poked his shoulder with her wand, and he felt it heal instantly.

“Now, just sit quietly for a minute — *sit!* And then you can go and get your score.”

She bustled out of the tent and he heard her go next door and say, “How does it feel now, Diggory?”

Harry didn’t want to sit still: He was too full of adrenaline. He got to his feet, wanting to see what was going on outside, but before he’d reached the mouth of the tent, two people had come darting inside — Hermione, followed closely by Ron.

“Harry, you were brilliant!” Hermione said squeakily. There were fingernail marks on her face where she had been clutching it in fear. “You were amazing! You really were!”

But Harry was looking at Ron, who was very white and staring at Harry as though he were a ghost.

“Harry,” he said, very seriously, “whoever put your name in that goblet — I — I reckon they’re trying to do you in!”

It was as though the last few weeks had never happened — as though Harry were meeting Ron for the first time, right after he’d been made champion.

“Caught on, have you?” said Harry coldly. “Took you long enough.”

Hermione stood nervously between them, looking from one to the other. Ron opened his mouth uncertainly. Harry knew Ron was about to apologize and suddenly he found he didn’t need to hear it.

“It’s okay,” he said, before Ron could get the words out. “Forget it.”

“No,” said Ron, “I shouldn’t’ve —”

“Forget it,” Harry said.

Ron grinned nervously at him, and Harry grinned back.

Hermione burst into tears.

“There’s nothing to cry about!” Harry told her, bewildered.

“You two are so *stupid!*” she shouted, stamping her foot on the ground, tears splashing down her front. Then, before either of them could stop her, she had given both of them a hug and dashed away, now positively howling.

“Barking mad,” said Ron, shaking his head. “Harry, c’mon, they’ll be putting up your scores. . . .”

Picking up the golden egg and his Firebolt, feeling more elated than he would have believed possible an hour ago, Harry ducked out of the tent, Ron by his side, talking fast.

“You were the best, you know, no competition. Cedric did this weird thing where he Transfigured a rock on the ground . . . turned it into a dog . . . he was trying to make the dragon go for the dog instead of him. Well, it was a pretty cool bit of Transfiguration, and it sort of worked, because he did get the egg, but he got burned as well — the dragon changed its mind halfway through and decided it would rather have him than the Labrador; he only just got away. And that Fleur girl tried this sort of charm, I think she was trying to put it into a trance — well, that kind of worked too, it went all sleepy, but then it snored, and this great jet of flame shot out, and her skirt caught fire — she put it out with a bit of water out of her wand. And Krum — you won’t believe this, but he didn’t even think of flying! He was probably the best after you, though. Hit it with some sort of spell right in the eye. Only thing is, it went trampling around in agony and squashed half the real eggs — they took marks off for that, he wasn’t supposed to do any damage to them.”

Ron drew breath as he and Harry reached the edge of the

enclosure. Now that the Horntail had been taken away, Harry could see where the five judges were sitting — right at the other end, in raised seats draped in gold.

“It’s marks out of ten from each one,” Ron said, and Harry, squinting up the field, saw the first judge — Madame Maxime — raise her wand in the air. What looked like a long silver ribbon shot out of it, which twisted itself into a large figure eight.

“Not bad!” said Ron as the crowd applauded. “I suppose she took marks off for your shoulder. . . .”

Mr. Crouch came next. He shot a number nine into the air.

“Looking good!” Ron yelled, thumping Harry on the back.

Next, Dumbledore. He too put up a nine. The crowd was cheering harder than ever.

Ludo Bagman — *ten*.

“Ten?” said Harry in disbelief. “But . . . I got hurt. . . . What’s he playing at?”

“Harry, don’t complain!” Ron yelled excitedly.

And now Karkaroff raised his wand. He paused for a moment, and then a number shot out of his wand too — four.

“*What?*” Ron bellowed furiously. “*Four?* You lousy, biased scumbag, you gave Krum ten!”

But Harry didn’t care, he wouldn’t have cared if Karkaroff had given him zero; Ron’s indignation on his behalf was worth about a hundred points to him. He didn’t tell Ron this, of course, but his heart felt lighter than air as he turned to leave the enclosure. And it wasn’t just Ron . . . those weren’t only Gryffindors cheering in the crowd. When it had come to it, when they had seen what he was facing, most

of the school had been on his side as well as Cedric's. . . . He didn't care about the Slytherins, he could stand whatever they threw at him now.

"You're tied in first place, Harry! You and Krum!" said Charlie Weasley, hurrying to meet them as they set off back toward the school. "Listen, I've got to run, I've got to go and send Mum an owl, I swore I'd tell her what happened — but that was unbelievable! Oh yeah — and they told me to tell you you've got to hang around for a few more minutes. . . . Bagman wants a word, back in the champions' tent."

Ron said he would wait, so Harry reentered the tent, which somehow looked quite different now: friendly and welcoming. He thought back to how he'd felt while dodging the Horntail, and compared it to the long wait before he'd walked out to face it. . . . There was no comparison; the wait had been immeasurably worse.

Fleur, Cedric, and Krum all came in together. One side of Cedric's face was covered in a thick orange paste, which was presumably mending his burn. He grinned at Harry when he saw him.

"Good one, Harry."

"And you," said Harry, grinning back.

"Well done, *all* of you!" said Ludo Bagman, bouncing into the tent and looking as pleased as though he personally had just got past a dragon. "Now, just a quick few words. You've got a nice long break before the second task, which will take place at half past nine on the morning of February the twenty-fourth — but we're giving you something to think about in the meantime! If you look down at those golden eggs you're all holding, you will see that they open . . . see the

hinges there? You need to solve the clue inside the egg — because it will tell you what the second task is, and enable you to prepare for it! All clear? Sure? Well, off you go, then!”

Harry left the tent, rejoined Ron, and they started to walk back around the edge of the forest, talking hard; Harry wanted to hear what the other champions had done in more detail. Then, as they rounded the clump of trees behind which Harry had first heard the dragons roar, a witch leapt out from behind them.

It was Rita Skeeter. She was wearing acid-green robes today; the Quick-Quotes Quill in her hand blended perfectly against them.

“Congratulations, Harry!” she said, beaming at him. “I wonder if you could give me a quick word? How you felt facing that dragon? How you feel *now*, about the fairness of the scoring?”

“Yeah, you can have a word,” said Harry savagely. “*Good-bye.*” And he set off back to the castle with Ron.

Die Eerste Taak

Toe Harry die Sondagoggend opstaan, trek hy so haastig aan dat dit 'n hele ruk neem voor hy besef dat hy sy hoed pleks van sy sokkie aan sy voet probeer trek. Toe hy al sy klere uiteindelik aan die regte ledemate het, gaan hy haastig uit om vir Hermien te soek en kry haar in die Groot Saal aan die Griffindortafel waar sy saam met Ginny ontbyt eet. Harry voel te mislik om te eet en wag tot Hermien haar laaste lepel pap ingesluk het voor hy haar buitentoe sleep om 'n ent te gaan stap. Terwyl hulle weer ver om die meer stap, vertel hy haar alles oor die drake en oor wat Sirius gesê het.

Geskok soos sy oor Sirius se waarskuwings oor Karkaroff is, dink Hermien steeds dat die drake 'n meer dringende probleem is.

“Kom ons probeer ten minste om jou tot Dinsdagaand aan die lewe te hou,” sê sy wanhopig, “dan kan ons ons oor Karkaroff bekommer.”

Hulle stap drie keer om die meer en probeer die hele ent pad om aan 'n eenvoudige towerspreuk te dink waarmee 'n draak beheer kan word. Absoluut niks kom by hulle op nie, dus gaan hulle terug biblioteek toe. Hier haal Harry elke boek oor drake waarop hy sy hande kan lê van die rakke af en hulle begin om deur die hoë stapel te blaai.

“Klouknip met towerkrag . . . behandel skubvrot . . . dit help niks, dis vir malles soos Hagrid wat die goed gesond wil hou . . .”

“Drake is besonder moeilik om te verslaan weens die eeue oue toorkuns waarmee hul dik skubbe deurtrek is en wat deur niks behalwe die kragtigste towerspreuke binnegedring kan word nie . . . maar Sirius het gesê 'n eenvoudige een sal werk . . .”

“Nou maar kom ons probeer 'n paar eenvoudige towerboeke,” sê Harry terwyl hy *Die wat Dol is op Drake* eenkant toe gooi.

Hy kom met 'n hele stapel towerboeke terug tafel toe, sit hulle neer en begin om een vir een deur hulle te blaai terwyl Hermien aanhoudend langs sy elmboog fluister. “Wel, daar is Omruiltowerspreuke . . . maar wat gaan jy nou eintlik omruil? Tensy jy sy tande ruil vir iets soos jellie-lekkers wat dit minder gevaarlik sal maak . . . Die probleem is net, soos daardie boek sê, dat daar nie veel is wat deur 'n draak se vel kan dring

nie . . . Ek sou sê transfigureer dit, maar iets wat so groot is, jy het nie juis 'n kans nie, ek twyfel of selfs professor McGonagall . . . behalwe as jy veronderstel is om 'n towerspel op jouself te sit? Dalk om jou ekstra magte te gee? Maar dis nie 'n eenvoudige towerspreuk nie, ek bedoel, ons het nog niks daarvan in die klas gedoen nie, ek weet net daarvan omdat ek besig is om UIL.-vraestelle . . .”

“Hermien,” sê Harry deur geklemde kake, “sal jy jou snater asseblief vir 'n rukkie hou? Ek probeer konsentreer.”

Toe Hermien stil word, is al wat egter gebeur dat Harry se brein skielik met 'n dowwe soort gegons gevul word wat maak dat hy glad nie kan konsentreer nie. Hy staar magteloos na die inhoudsopgawe voorin *Basiese Paljasse vir Besige Kulbasse: kitskoppesnellery* . . . maar drake het nie lare nie . . . *peperasem* . . . dit sal 'n draak se arsenaal nou behoorlik vuurkrag gee . . . *horingtong* . . . net wat hy nodig het, om die ding 'n ekstra wapen te gee . . .

“O nee, hy's al weer terug, hoekom kan hy nie op sy simpele skip sit en lees nie?” sê Hermien geïrriteerd toe Viktor Krum ingeslof kom, nors na hulle staar en eenkant in 'n hoek met 'n stapel boeke gaan sit. “Kom, Harry, kom ons gaan terug na die geselskamer toe . . . sy giggelende bewonderaarsklub sal enige oomblik hier wees . . .”

En sowaar, toe hulle by die biblioteek uitstap, sluip 'n groepie meisies op hul tone by die biblioteek in, een van hulle met 'n Bulgaarse serp om die middel.

Daardie nag slaap Harry skaars. Toe hy Maandagoggend wakker word, oorweeg hy dit vir die eerste keer ooit om van Hogwarts af weg te loop. Toe hy egter tydens ontbyt in die Groot Saal rondkyk en dink oor wat alles op die spel is as hy die kasteel sou verlaat, besef hy dat hy dit nie sal kan doen nie. Dit is die enigste plek waar hy nog ooit gelukkig was . . . wel, hy was seker by sy ouers ook gelukkig, maar dit kan hy glad nie onthou nie.

Die wete dat hy eerder hier wil wees met 'n draak as in Ligusterlaan met Dudley, is op 'n manier half gerusstellend en laat hom effens kalmer voel. Hy eet sy spek met inspanning (sy keel werk nie so lekker nie) en toe hy en Hermien opstaan, sien hy dat Cedric Diggory by Hoesenproes se tafel ook orent kom.

Cedric weet nog steeds nie van die drake nie . . . indien Harry reg is dat Madame Maxine en Karkaroff vir Fleur en Krum gesê het, is hy die enigste kampioen wat van niks weet nie . . .

“Hermien, ek sien jou by die kweekhuise,” sê Harry wat tot 'n besluit kom toe hy Cedric by die Saal sien uitstap. “Gaan solank, ek kom.”

“Harry, jy gaan laat wees, die klok gaan nou-nou lui –”

“Ek sal jou inhaal, oukei.”

Teen die tyd dat Harry die onderpunt van die marmertappe bereik het, is Cedric reeds bo. Hy loop saam met 'n horde sesdejaarsvriende. Harry is nie lus om voor hulle met Cedric te praat nie; van hulle haal gedurig uit Rika Skinner se artikel aan as hy naby hulle kom. Hy volg Cedric op 'n afstand en sien dat hy na die Towerspreuk-gang stap. Dit gee Harry 'n idee. Hy kom 'n entjie agter Cedric tot stilstand, haal sy towerstaf uit en mik versigtig.

“Diffindo!”

Cedric se sak split oop. Perkament, veerpenne en boeke tuimel oor die vloer en verskeie bottels inkbreek oop.

“Dis oukei,” sê Cedric in 'n stem wat moedeloos klink toe sy vriende buk om hom te help, “sê vir Flickerpitt ek kom . . .”

Dit is net waarop Harry gehoop het. Hy steek sy towerstaf terug in sy klee, wag tot Cedric se vriende in hul klaskamer is en stap haastig met die gang langs wat nou verlate is buiten hy en Cedric.

“Hallo,” sê Cedric terwyl hy 'n eksemplaar van 'n *Gids vir Gevorderde Transfigurasië* wat nou vol inkvlekke is, optel. “My sak het gebreek . . . splinternuut en alles . . .”

“Cedric,” sê Harry, “die eerste taak is drake.”

“Wat?” sê Cedric en hy kyk op.

“Drake,” sê Harry, wat nou vinnig praat ingeval professor Flickerpitt uitkom om te sien wat van Cedric geword het. “Hulle het vier, een vir elkeen van ons en ons moet verby hulle kom.”

Cedric gaap hom aan. Harry sien hoe iets van die paniek wat hy sedert Saterdag nag voel in Cedric se grys oë flikker.

“Is jy seker?” vra Cedric in 'n gesmoorde stem.

“Doodseker,” sê Harry. “Ek het hulle gesien.”

“Maar hoe het jy uitgevind? Ons is nie veronderstel om te weet nie . . .”

“Maak nie saak nie,” sê Harry vinnig – hy weet Hagrid kan in die moeilikheid kom as hy die waarheid sou praat. “Maar ek is nie die enigste een wat weet nie. Fleur en Krum weet ook teen hierdie tyd – sowel Madame Maxine as Karkaroff het die drake gesien.”

Cedric kom orent; sy arms is vol inkbesmeerde veerpenne, perkamente en boeke en sy geskeurde sak hang aan een skouer. Hy staar na Harry en daar is 'n verwarde, amper agterdogtige trek in sy oë.

“Hoekom sê jy vir my?” vra hy.

Harry kyk hom ongelowig aan. Hy is seker dat Cedric dit nie sou gevra het as hy die drake met sy eie oë gesien het nie. Harry sal nie eens dat sy ergste vyand daardie monsters onvoorbereid takel nie – wel, dalk Malfoy of Snerp . . .

“Dis net . . . regverdig, of hoe?” sê hy vir Cedric. “Nou weet ons almal . . . nou's ons op gelyke voet, nie waar nie?”

Cedric kyk nog steeds effens agterdochtig na hom toe Harry 'n bekende klonkgeluid agter hom hoor. Toe hy omdraai, sien hy hoe Maloog Moodie by 'n nabygeleë klaskamer uitkom.

“Kom saam met my, Potter,” grom hy. “Diggory, weg is jy.”

Bedug staar Harry na Moodie. Het hy gehoor wat hy gesê het? “H'm – professor, ek is veronderstel om by Herbologie –”

“Maak nie saak nie, Potter. In my kantoor, asseblief . . .”

Harry gaan agterna terwyl hy wonder wat nou met hom gaan gebeur. Wat as Moodie wil weet hoe hy van die drake weet? Wat as Moodie na Dompeldorius gaan en vir Hagrid weggee of sommer net vir Harry in 'n muishond verander? Wel, dit sal dalk makliker wees om verby 'n draak te kom as hy 'n muishond is, dink Harry floutjies, hy sal baie kleiner wees, moeiliker om raak te sien so van 'n hoogte van vyftien meter af . . .

Hy volg Moodie tot in sy kantoor. Moodie maak die deur agter hulle toe en draai dan na Harry. Sowel sy magiese as sy normale oog is op Harry gerig.

“Dit was 'n baie ordentlike ding wat jy so pas gedoen het, Potter,” sê Moodie bedaard.

Harry weet nie wat om te sê nie; dit is nie die reaksie wat hy verwag het nie.

“Sit,” sê Moodie en Harry gaan sit en kyk om hom rond.

Hy het hierdie kantoor al tevore saam met twee van sy vorige inwoners besoek. In professor Lockhart se tyd was die mure beplak met stralende, knipogende prente van professor Lockhart self. Toe Lupin hier gewerk het, was daar 'n goeie kans dat jy 'n voorbeeld van die een of ander fassinerende Donker magiese kreatuur hier sou raakloop, een wat hy in die hande gekry het sodat hulle dit in die klas kon bestudeer. Nou is die kantoor egter gepak met 'n aantal besonder vreemde voorwerpe wat, so dink Harry, Moodie seker gebruik het in die dae toe hy 'n Aurore was.

Op sy lessenaar staan iets wat soos 'n groot gekraakte glastol lyk; Harry herken dit dadelik as 'n Kulklikker omdat hy self een het, hoewel syne baie kleiner as Moodie s'n is. Op 'n klein tafeltjie in die hoek staan 'n voorwerp wat soos 'n vibrerende goue televisie-antenna lyk. Dit gons ligweg. Teen die muur oorkant Harry hang iets wat soos 'n spieël lyk, maar wat nie die vertrek reflekteer nie. Skaduagtige figure wat nie een helder in fokus is nie beweeg daarin rond.

“Hou jy van my Donker verklikkers?” vra Moodie wat Harry fyn dophou.

“Wat is dit?” vra Harry en wys na die vibrerende goue antenna.

“Geheime Sensor. Vibreer as dit geheimhouding en leuens bespeur . . . is nie hier van veel nut nie, te veel steurings – studente die wêreld vol wat leuens vertel oor hoekom hulle nie hul huiswerk gedoen het nie.

Gons nog die hele tyd sedert ek hier aangekom het. Ek moes my Kulkliker ook diskonnekteer omdat dit nie wou ophou fluit nie. Dis ekstra-sensitief, vang die goed kilometers ver op. Vang natuurlik heel moontlik meer as net blote kattedwaad op,” eindig hy met ’n grom.

“En wat doen die spieël?”

“O, dis my Vyandglas. Sien jy hoe hulle daar buite rondsluip? Ek is eers in die moeilikheid as ek die wit van hul oë kan sien. Dis wanneer ek my trommel oopmaak.”

Hy uiter ’n kort, harde lag en wys na die groot trommel onder die venster. Dit het sewe sleutelgate op ’n ry. Harry wonder nog wat daarin is toe Moodie se volgende vraag hom met ’n slag aarde toe bring.

“So . . . jy weet dus van die drake, nè?”

Harry aarsel. Hy was bang hiervoor – maar hy het nie vir Cedric gesê nie en hy gaan beslis nie vir Moodie sê dat Hagrid die reëls oortree het nie.

“Dis alles in orde,” sê Moodie terwyl hy gaan sit en sy houtbeen met ’n kreungeluid strek. “Kullery is tradisie by die Drietowenaarstoernooi, was nog altyd gewees.”

“Ek het nie gekul nie,” sê Harry skerp. “Dit was ’n – ’n soort ongeluk dat ek uitgevind het.”

Moodie grinnik. “Ek het jou nie beskuldig nie, boet. Ek het van die begin af vir Dompeldorius gesê hy kan so edelmoedig wees as wat hy wil, maar dat ek wed ou Karkaroff en Maxine sal nie so wees nie. Hulle sal vir hul kampioene alles moontlik sê. Hulle wil wen. Hulle wil vir Dompeldorius uitstof. Hulle wil bewys dat hy ook maar net ’n mens is.”

Moodie uiter ’n hees laggie en sy magiese oog draai so vinnig rond dat dit Harry dronk in die kop laat voel.

“So . . . het jy al ’n idee hoe jy verby jou draak gaan kom?” sê Moodie.

“Nee,” sê Harry.

“Wel, ek gaan nie vir jou sê nie,” sê Moodie skor. “Ek is nie een vir ’n voortrekkery nie. Ek sal jou slegs ’n stukkie goeie algemene raad gee. Ten eerste – *benut jou sterk punte.*”

“Ek het nie sulke goed nie,” sê Harry voor hy homself kan keer.

“Verskoon my,” grom Moodie, “as ek sê jy het sterk punte, dan het jy. Dink daaroor na. Waarin blink jy uit?”

Harry probeer konsentreer. Waarin *blink* hy uit? Wel, dit is nogal maklik –

“Kwiddiek,” sê hy vaag, “asof dit nogal sal help –”

“Dis reg,” sê Moodie terwyl hy so stip na hom staar dat sy magiese oog skaars roer. “Jy’s ’n verbrands goeie vlieër vir sover ek al gehoor het.”

“Ja, maar . . .” Harry staar na hom. “Ek mag nie ’n besem by my hê nie, ek het net my towerstaf –”

“My tweede stukkie algemene advies,” val Moodie hom luidkeels in

die rede, "is om 'n baie eenvoudige towerspreuk te gebruik wat jou in staat sal stel om dit wat jy nodig het te kry."

Harry gaap hom oorbluf aan. Wat het hy nodig?

"Komaan, boet . . ." fluister Moodie. "Sit twee en twee bymekaar . . . dis tog nie so moeilik nie . . ."

Toe kliek dit. Vlieg is sy sterk punt. Hy moet in die lug verby die draak kom. Daarvoor het hy sy Vuurslag nodig. En om die Vuurslag in die hande te kry, moet hy vir –

"Hermien," fluister Harry toe hy hom tien minute later na die derde kweekhuis haas en gejaag vir professor Spruit om verskoning vra toe hy verby haar storm, "Hermien – jy moet my help."

"Wat dink jy probeer ek nog die hele tyd doen, Harry?" fluister sy terug en haar oë is rond van kommer bo-oor die top van die bewende Loenskapperbos wat sy aan die snoei is.

"Hermien, teen môremiddag moet ek die Ontbiedtowerspreuk behoorlik kan doen."

Hulle begin dus oefen. Hulle gaan nie in vir middagete nie, maar pyl reguit op 'n leë klaskamer af waar Harry alles in sy vermoë doen om 'n verskeidenheid voorwerpe oor die vertrek na hom toe te laat vlieg. Hy sukkel nog steeds. Die boeke en veerpenne hou aan om halfpad oor die vertrek moed te verloor en val dan soos klippe grond toe.

"Konsentreer, Harry, konsentreer . . ."

"Wat dink jy doen ek miskien?" sê Harry ergerlik. "Dis net dat 'n vieslike groot draak vir die een of ander rede gedurig in my kop staan en spring . . . oukei, kom ons probeer weer . . ."

Hy wil Waarsêery oorslaan om nog te oefen, maar Hermien weier botweg om Rekenmatiek te mis en dit maak nie sin om sonder haar daar te bly nie. Hy moet dus meer as 'n uur van professor Trelawney verduur wat vir die helfte van die les vir almal vertel dat die huidige posisie van Mars met betrekking tot Saturnus beteken dat mense wat in Julie gebore is die gevaar van 'n skielike, gewelddadige dood loop.

"Wel, dit is wonderlik," sê Harry hardop toe hy sy humeur nie langer kan beteuel nie, "solank dit net nie uitgerek is nie, ek wil nie ly nie."

Vir 'n oomblik lyk dit asof Ron gaan lag; hy vang Harry se oog vir die eerste keer in dae, maar Harry voel nog te wrokkig teenoor hom om toe te gee. Die res van die lesuur probeer hy om klein goetertjies onder die tafel met sy towerstaf na hom toe aan te trek. Hy kry dit reg om 'n vlieg tot in sy hand te laat vlieg, maar hy's nie heeltemal seker of dit weens sy vaardigheid met die Ontbiedtowerspreuk was of nie – dalk was die vlieg net dom.

Na Waarsêery dwing hy homself om iets vir aandete te eet en toe gaan hy en Hermien terug na die leë klaskamer toe. Hulle gebruik die onsig-

baarheidsmantel om die onderwysers te vermy. Hier oefen hulle tot na middernag. Hulle sou langer gebly het, maar Nurks daag op en begin om stoele in die klaskamer rond te slinger onder die voorwendsel dat Harry goeters na hom gegooi wil hê. Harry en Hermien gee haastig pad voor die geraas vir Fillis lok en gaan terug na Griffindor se geselskamer wat nou genadiglik leeg is.

Teen twee-uur daardie oggend staan Harry voor die vuurherd omring deur hope voorwerpe – boeke, veerpenne, etlike omgedopte stoele, 'n ou stel Spoegklippe en Neville se padda, Trevor. Dis eers tydens die laaste uur dat Harry die Ontbiedtowerspreuk regtig begin bemeester het.

“Dis beter, Harry, dis stukke beter,” sê Hermien wat stokflou maar hoog in haar skik lyk.

“Wel, nou weet ons wat om volgende keer as ek nie 'n towerspreuk kan regkry nie, te doen,” sê Harry terwyl hy 'n Runewoordeboek na Hermien toe teruggooi sodat hy weer kan probeer, “dreig my net met 'n draak. Goed . . .” Weer lig hy sy towerstaf. “*Accio Woordeboek!*”

Die swaar boek seil uit Hermien se hand, vlieg oor die vertrek en Harry vang dit.

“Harry, ek dink regtig jy het dit!” sê Hermien verlig.

“Solank dit net mōre werk,” sê Harry. “Die Vuurslag is 'n hele ent verder as die goed hier binne, dit gaan binne-in die kasteel wees en ek gaan daar buite op die terrein . . .”

“Dit maak nie saak nie,” sê Hermien beslis. “Solank jy net regtig hard daarop konsentreer, sal dit kom, Harry, maar ons moet nou 'n bietjie slaap inkry . . . jy gaan dit nodig hê.”

Harry het daardie aand so hard gekonsentreer om die Ontbiedtowerspreuk te bemeester dat sy blinde paniek hom in 'n mate verlaat het. Dit kom egter die volgende oggend in volle sterkte terug. Die atmosfeer in die skool is een van groot spanning en afwagting. Alle lesse word teen die middag gestaak om die studente kans te gee om na die drake se kamp te gaan – hoewel hulle natuurlik nog nie weet wat daar op hulle wag nie.

Harry voel vreemd apart van almal om hom, of hulle hom nou sterkte toewens of in die verbystap “*Ons hou 'n doos sneesdoekies gereed, Potter*” vir hom sis. Hy is so op sy senuwees dat hy wonder of hy nie dalk gaan kop verloor wanneer hulle hom na sy draak neem en 'n vloek op almal om hom sit nie.

Die tyd haal weer die vreemdste toertjies uit. Dit storm met lang hale voort sodat dit voel asof hy die een oomblik nog in sy eerste klas, Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns, sit en die volgende instap vir middagete . . . en toe (wat het van die oggend geword? Die laaste draaklose ure?) pyl professor McGonagall haastig in die Groot Saal op hom af. Daar is 'n klomp mense wat toekyk.

“Potter, die kampioene moet dadelik na die terrein gaan . . . julle moet gereed maak vir jul eerste taak.”

“Oukei,” sê Harry. Toe hy opstaan, val sy vurk klaterend op sy bord.

“Sterkte, Harry,” fluister Hermien. “Dit sal goed gaan!”

“Ja,” sê Harry in ’n stem wat glad nie soos syne klink nie.

Hy stap saam met professor McGonagall by die Groot Saal uit. Sy tree ook glad nie soos haar ou self op nie, sy lyk, om die waarheid te sê, amper net so senuagtig as Hermien. Toe sy saam met hom met die kliptrappe af die koue Novembermiddag tegemoetstap, sit sy haar hand op sy skouer.

“Moenie paniekerig raak nie,” sê sy, “hou net kop . . . ons het teweens wat regstaan om die situasie te beredder indien sake sou skeef loop . . . hoofsaak is om jou bes te doen, dan sal alles regkom . . . voel jy goed?”

“Ja,” hoor Harry homself sê. “Ja, ek’s oukei.”

Sy lei hom om die rand van die Woud na waar die drake gehou word, maar toe hulle by die groepie bome kom van waar die kamp duidelik sigbaar behoort te wees, sien Harry dat ’n tent so opgeslaan is dat die drake daaragter verberg is. Die tent se ingang wys na hulle toe.

“Jy moet saam met die ander kampioene hier ingaan,” sê professor McGonagall in ’n bewerige soort stem, “en jou beurt afwag, Potter. Mnr Bagman is daar binne . . . hy sal vir jou sê wat – wat die prosedure is . . . sterkte.”

“Dankie,” sê Harry in ’n flou stem wat klink asof dit van ver af kom. Sy laat hom alleen voor die tent en Harry gaan in.

Fleur Delacour sit in ’n hoek op ’n lae houtstoel. Sy lyk nie naastenby so kalm soos gewoonlik nie, maar eerder ietwat bleek en natgesweet. Viktor Krum lyk nog knorriger as gewoonlik, wat Harry reken sy manier is om te wys dat hy op sy senuwees is. Cedric marsjeer op en neer. Toe Harry inkom, gee hy vir hom ’n klein glimlaggie en toe Harry terugglimlag, kan hy voel dat die spiere in sy gesig hard moet werk asof hulle vergeet het hoe om dit te doen.

“Harry! Skote!” sê Bagman tevrede terwyl hy om hom kyk. “Kom in, kom in, maak jouself tuis!”

Bagman lyk na ’n effens ooropgeblase strokieskarakter waar hy tussen al die bleekgesig-kampioene staan. Hy dra weer sy ou Wasp-klere.

“Wel, nou is ons voltallig – tyd om julle op hoogte te bring!” sê Bagman vrolik. “Sodra die toeskouers gereed is, sal ek hierdie sak voor elkeen van julle hou,” – hy hou ’n klein sakkie van pers sy in die lug en skud dit voor hulle – “waaruit elkeen ’n modelletjie van die ding wat julle moet takel, sal haal! Daar is verskillende – h’m – variëteite, sien. En ek moet vir julle nog iets ook sê . . . h’m, ja . . . jul taak is om die goue eier in die hande te kry!”

Harry kyk om hom rond. Cedric knik een keer om te wys dat hy Bagman se woorde verstaan het en begin toe weer op en af marsjeer; hy lyk effens groen in die gesig. Fleur Delacour en Krum reageer glad nie. Dalk is hulle bang dat hulle naars sal word as hulle hul monde sou oopmaak; dit is vir seker hoe Harry voel. Dis net dat hulle ten minste vrywillig hier is . . .

Kort hierna hoor hulle honderde pare voete wat verby die tent stap terwyl hul eienaars opgewonde gesels, lag en grappe maak . . . Harry voel so anders as die res van die mense dat hulle net sowel verskillende spesies kan wees. En toe – dit voel vir Harry soos 'n sekonde later – maak Bagman die pers sysakkie oop.

“Dames eerste,” sê hy toe hy dit vir Fleur Delacour aanbied.

Sy steek 'n bewende hand in die sak en haal 'n perfekte modelletjie van 'n draak uit – die Walliese Groene. Dit het 'n nommer twee om die nek. Toe Fleur nie 'n teken van verbasing gee nie, maar eerder van 'n soort vasberade aanvaarding, weet Harry dat hy reg was: Madame Maxine het vir haar gesê wat op haar wag.

Dieselfde geld vir Krum. Hy haal die skarlakenrooi Chinese Vuurbol uit. Dit het 'n nommer drie om die nek. Hy knipper nie eens sy oë nie, staar bloot na die grond.

Cedric steek sy hand in die sak en die blougrys Sweedse Kortsnoet kom daaruit met 'n nommer “een” om die nek. Harry weet wat oor is toe hy sy hand in die sysakkie steek en die Hongaarse Horingstert met die nommer vier uithaal. Terwyl hy daarna kyk, strek dit sy vlerke en ontbloot sy klein slag tandjies.

“Wel, daar het julle dit!” sê Bagman. “Julle het elkeen die draak uitgehaal waarteen julle te staan gaan kom en die getal is die volgorde waarin julle dit moet doen, sien? Ek moet julle binnekort verlaat omdat ek kommentaar moet lewer. Mnr. Diggory, jy is eerste aan die beurt, gaan die kamp binne sodra jy die fluitjie hoor, goed? Nou . . . Harry . . . kan ek gou 'n woordjie met jou wissel? Buite?”

“H'm . . . ja,” sê Harry dofweg toe hy opstaan en saam met Bagman by die tent uitgaan. Bagman loop 'n kort entjie saam met hom tussen die bome in en draai dan met 'n vaderlike uitdrukking op sy gesig na hom toe.

“Hoe voel jy, Harry? Enigiets wat ek vir jou kan doen?”

“Ekskuus?” sê Harry. “Ek – nee, niks.”

“Het jy 'n plan?” vra Bagman en hy laat sy stem geheimsinnig sak, “want ek gee nie om om jou 'n paar wenke te gee nie, weet jy. Ek bedoel,” gaan Bagman voort terwyl sy stem nog sagter word, “jy trek aan die kortste ent hier, Harry . . . as daar enigiets is wat ek kan doen om te help . . .”

“Nee,” sê Harry so vinnig dat hy weet dat dit ongeskik klink, “nee – ek – ek het klaar besluit wat ek gaan doen, dankie.”

“Niemand sal weet nie, Harry,” sê Bagman en knipoog vir hom.

“Nee, ek is oukei,” sê Harry terwyl hy wonder waarom hy aanhou om dit vir mense te sê en ook of hy al ooit minder oukei was. “Ek het ’n uitgewerkte plan, ek —”

Iewers blaas ’n fluitjie.

“O, gits, ek moet weg wees!” sê Bagman geskok en maak homself uit die voete.

Harry loop terug tent toe en sien hoe Cedric uitkom. Hy lyk nog groener as tevore. Harry probeer om hom in die verbystap sterkte toe te wens, maar al wat by sy mond uitkom, is ’n soort hees gekreun.

Harry gaan terug na Fleur en Krum toe. Oomblikke later hoor hulle ’n gebrul vanuit die skare wat beteken dat Cedric die kamp binnegegaan het en nou van aangesig tot aangesig voor die lewende ewebeeld van sy model staan . . .

Om daar te sit en luister, is erger as wat Harry hom ooit sou kon indink. Die skare skree . . . gil . . . snak soos ’n enkele veelkoppige gedierte na asem, terwyl Cedric skynbaar uithaal om verby die Sweedse Kortsnoet te kom. Krum staar nog steeds na die grond. Fleur stap nou in Cedric se voetspore, om en om in die tent. Bagman se kommentaar maak alles veel, veel erger . . . aaklige prentjies neem in Harry se gemoed vorm aan toe hy hoor: “Oee, noue ontkoming daardie, baie nou” . . . “Hy vat kanse, daardie een!” . . . “Slim beweging – jammer dit het nie gewerk nie!”

Toe, omtrent ’n kwartier later, hoor Harry ’n oorverdowende gebrul wat net een ding kan beteken: Cedric het verby die draak gekom en die goue eier gegryp.

“Inderdaad baie goed!” skree Bagman. “En nou vir die beoordelaars se punte!”

Hy skree die puntetellings egter nie uit nie; Harry veronderstel dat die beoordelaars dit in die lug hou en vir die skare wys.

“Een paaltjie plat, nog drie oor!” gil Bagman toe die fluitjie weer blaas. “Juffrou Delacour, asseblief!”

Fleur bewe van kop tot tone; toe sy met haar kop in die lug en haar towerstaf in die hand by die tent uitstap, voel Harry meer toegeneë teenoor haar as wat hy nog tot dusver gevoel het. Hy en Krum, wat mekaar se oë vermy, bly nou alleen aan teenoorgestelde kante van die tent agter.

Dieselfde proses begin weer . . . “O, ek is nie seker dat dit verstandig was nie!” hoor hulle Bagman uitgelate skree. “Oe . . . amper! Versigtig nou . . . grote genade, ek dag sy het dit!”

Tien minute later hoor Harry hoe die skare opnuut losbars met aplous . . . Fleur moet geslaag het. Daar is ’n stilte waarin Fleur se punte gewys word . . . nog ’n geklap . . . en toe, vir die derde keer, die fluitjie.

“En hier kom mnr. Krum!” gil Bagman en Krum slof uit sodat Harry heeltemal alleen agterbly.

Hy is baie meer bewus van sy liggaam as gewoonlik; baie bewus van die manier waarop sy hart vinnig pomp en hoe sy vingers van vrees tintel . . . tog voel dit terselfdertyd asof hy buite homself is, of hy die kante van die tent sien en die skare iewers ver weg hoor . . .

“Baie waaghalsig!” gil Bagman en Harry hoor hoe die Chinese Vuurbol ’n akklike bulkende kreet los terwyl die skare gelyk hul asem intrek. “Dit wil gedoen wees en – ja – hy het die eier!”

Die toejuiging versplinter die winterluggie soos brekende glas; Krum is klaar – Harry sal binne oomblikke aan die beurt kom.

Hy staan op, merk vaagweg dat sy bene voel asof hulle van malvalek- kers gemaak is. Hy wag. Toe hoor hy die fluitjie. Hy stap deur die tent se ingang terwyl die angs binne-in hom tot ’n crescendo styg. Hy loop verby die bome en deur ’n opening in die heining om die kamp.

Hy sien alles voor hom asof dit ’n baie kleurvolle droom is. Honderde en honderde gesigte staar na hom vanaf pawiljoene wat daarheen getoor is sedert hy die vorige keer daar was. En daar, aan die ander kant van die kamp, laaggebuk oor haar broeisel eiers, haar vlerke half toegevou, haar boosaardige geel oë op hom, is die Horingstert, ’n monsteragtige, skub- berige swart akkedis wat met haar stekelstert slaan sodat dit meter lange uitgeholde gate in die harde grond maak. Die skare maak ’n ontsettende kabaal, maar of hulle aan sy kant is of nie, weet Harry nie. Hy gee ook nie om nie. Dis tyd om te doen wat hy moet doen . . . om te fokus, heel- temal en volkome, op wat sy enigste kans is . . .

Hy lig sy towerstaf.

“Accio Vuurslag!” skreeu hy.

Hy wag terwyl elke vesel in hom hoop, bid . . . as dit nie werk nie . . . as dit nie kom nie . . . dis of hy alles om hom soos deur ’n soort glimmen- de, deurskynende skerm sien, soos ’n hittegolf wat die kamp en die hon- derde gesigte om hom vreemd laat swem . . .

Toe hoor hy iets wat deur die lug agter hom aangesnel kom; hy draai om en sien hoe sy Vuurslag om die kant van die Woud op hom afpyl, tot in die kamp seil en langs hom in die lug tot stilstand kom, gereed vir hom om op te klim. Nou raas die skare nog harder . . . Bagman skreeu iets . . . maar Harry se ore werk nie meer so lekker nie . . . dis ook nie belangrik om alles te kan hoor nie . . .

Hy swaai sy been oor die besem en skop van die grond af weg. En ’n oomblik later gebeur die wonderwerk . . .

Terwyl hy met die wind in sy hare na bo vlieg sodat die skare se gesigte daar onder blote vleeskleurige speldeprikkies word en die Horingstert skaars so groot soos ’n hond lyk, besef hy dat hy nie net die grond ag- tergelaat het nie, maar ook sy vrees . . . hy is terug waar hy hoort . . .

Dis net nog ’n Kwiddiekwedstryd, dis al . . . net nog ’n Kwiddiekwed- stryd en daardie Horingstert is net nog ’n teenstander . . .

Hy kyk af na die broeisel eiers en sien hoe die goue een tussen die semmentkleuriges skitter, veilig tussen die draak se kloue. "Oukei," sê Harry vir homself, "verwarringstegnieke . . . hier gaan ek . . ."

Hy duik. Die Horingstert se kop volg hom; hy weet wat dit gaan doen en trek net betyds uit die duikslag op; 'n straal vuur spuit na waar hy sou gewees het as hy nie geswenk het nie . . . maar dit kan Harry nie skeel nie . . . dit was net soos om 'n Moker te ontwyk . . .

"Grote genugtig, maar hy kan vir jou vlieg!" gil Bagman toe die skare gillend na hul asem snak. "Kyk jy, mnr. Krum?"

Harry styg hoog in 'n sirkel op; die Horingstert volg hom nog steeds; haar kop draai om en om op haar lang nek – as hy so aanhou sal sy lekker dronk word – maar dis dalk beter om dit nie te ver te voer nie, netnou spoeg sy weer vuur –

Harry duik net toe die Horingstert haar mond oopmaak, maar hierdie keer is hy nie so gelukkig nie – hy mis die vlamme, maar die stert kom soos 'n sweepslag verby hom en een van die lang stekels vang sy skouer en skeur sy kleed –

Hy voel hoe dit brand, hy hoor 'n geskree en kreune vanuit die skare, maar dit voel nie asof die sny te diep is nie . . . nou storm hy agterom die Horingstert en skielik tref 'n moontlikheid hom . . .

Dit lyk nie asof die Horingstert van plan is om op te staan nie, sy voel te beskermend oor haar eiers. Hoewel sy wriemel en krul, haar vlerke oop- en toevou en daardie vreesaanjaende geel oë op Harry gerig hou, lyk dit asof sy bang is om te ver weg te gaan . . . Maar hy moet haar oorreed, anders sal hy nooit by die eiers kom nie . . . die ding is om dit versigtig, geleidelik, te doen . . .

Hy begin vlieg, eers hierdie kant toe, dan daardie kant toe, nie naby genoeg sodat sy hom met haar vurige asem sal wil afweer nie, maar na genoeg om 'n bedreiging te wees om te verseker dat sy haar oë op hom moet hou. Haar kop swaai hierdie kant toe, daardie kant toe en sy hou hom deur daardie vertikale pupille dop. Haar slagtande is ontbloot . . .

Hy vlieg hoër. Die Horingstert se kop styg saam met hom, haar nek is nou tot sy uiterste gestrek en swaai nog steeds heen en weer, soos 'n slang voor 'n besweerder . . .

Harry gaan nog 'n paar meter hoër. Hy is vir haar soos 'n vlieg wat sy wil verpletter; haar stert slaan heen en weer, maar hy is te hoog om by te kom . . . sy skiet vlamme die lug in wat hy ontwyk . . . haar kake gaan wyd oop . . .

"Komaan," hyg Harry terwyl hy uitlokkend voor haar wegswenk, "komaan, kom kry my . . . op is jy, toe . . ."

Uiteindelik kom sy orent en sprei haar groot, leeragtige swart vlerke wat so wyd soos 'n kleinerige vliegtuig s'n is oop – en Harry duik. Voor die draak mooi besef wat hy gaan doen of waarheen hy verdwyn het,

skiet hy af grond toe waar die eiers nou oop en bloot lê, sonder die beskerming van haar kloue en haar voorpote – hy laat los die Vuurslag – hy gryp die goue eier –

Toe, met 'n geweldige vaartversnelling, seil hy oor die pawiljoene met die swaar eier veilig onder sy onbeseerde arm. Dis asof iemand die volume skielik opgedraai het – vir die eerste keer is hy behoorlik bewus van die geraas wat die skare maak. Hulle skree en juig hom net so hard soos die Ierse ondersteuners by die Wêreldbeker toe –

“Wil jy nou meer!” gil Bagman. “Wil jy nou meer! Ons jongste kampioen het sy eier die gouste gekry! Wel, dit sal mnr. Potter se kanse aansienlik verbeter!”

Harry sien hoe die draakoppassers vorentoe storm om die Horingstert tot bedaring te bring en hoe professor McGonagall, professor Moodie en Hagrid by die ingang na die kamp, met breë glimlagte wat selfs op hierdie afstand sigbaar is, nader storm om by hom uit te kom terwyl hulle hom na hulle toe wink. Hy vlieg terug oor die stellasies terwyl die geraas van die skare teen sy oortrommels hamer, en toe hy inkom en 'n gladde landing maak, is sy hart ligter as wat dit vir weke was . . . Hy het die eerste taak afgehandel, hy het oorleef . . .

“Dit was uitstekend, Potter!” roep professor McGonagall uit toe hy van die Vuurslag afklim – van haar is dit oordadige lof. Hy sien hoe haar hand bewe toe sy na sy skouer wys. “Jy moet vir Madame Pomfrey gaan sien voor die beoordelaars jou telling bekend maak . . . sy's daar oorkant, sy moes vir Diggory ook regmaak . . .”

“Jy het dit reggekry, Harry!” sê Hagrid skor. “Jy het! En teen die Horingstert en alles en jy weet Charlie het gesê dis die ergste –”

“Dankie, Hagrid,” sê Harry hard sodat Hagrid nie alles moet uitblaker en laat blyk dat hy die drake vooraf vir Harry gewys het nie.

Professor Moodie lyk ook baie in sy skik; sy magiese oog dans in sy oogkas rond.

“Stadig oor die klippe is die beste manier, Potter,” grom hy.

“Toe-toe, Potter, die noodhulptent, asseblief . . .” sê professor McGonagall.

Harry haal nog swaar asem toe hy uit die kamp stap en Madame Pomfrey, wat baie bekommerd lyk, voor 'n tweede tent sien staan.

“Drake!” sê sy ergerlik toe sy Harry binnetoe trek. Die tent is in afdelings verdeel; hy kan Cedric se skaduwee deur die seil sien, maar dit lyk nie asof Cedric ernstig beseer is nie; hy sit ten minste regop. Madame Pomfrey ondersoek Harry se skouer terwyl sy die hele tyd woedende aanmerkings maak. “Laas jaar Dementors, vanjaar drake, wat gaan hulle volgende keer na hierdie skool bring? Jy kan jou seëninge tel . . . dis net 'n velwond . . . moet dit egter goed skoonmaak voor ek dit gesond kan toor . . .”

Sy ontsmet die sny met 'n wattetjie pers vloeistof wat rook en hom brand, maar dan raak sy met haar towerstaf aan sy skouer en hy voel hoe dit onmiddellik gesond word.

“Sit net 'n rukkie stil – sit! Dan kan jy uitgaan om jou telling te sien.”

Sy skuifel uit die tent en hy hoor hoe sy langsaan ingaan en sê, “Hoe voel dit nou, Diggory?”

Harry kan omtrent nie stilsit nie; hy is te vol adrenalien. Hy staan op om te sien wat buitekant aangaan, maar voor hy by die tentopening kan kom, kom twee mense binnegedraf – Hermien, met Ron kort op haar hakke.

“Harry, jy was briljant!” sê Hermien in 'n piepstemmetjie. Daar is naelmerke op haar gesig soos sy dit beangs vasgeklou het. “Jy was verstommend! Jy was regtig!”

Harry kyk egter na Ron wat baie bleek is en na Harry staar asof hy 'n spook is.

“Harry,” sê hy baie ernstig, “wie ook al jou naam in daardie Beker gesit het – ek – ek is seker hulle wil jou dood hê!”

Dis asof die laaste paar weke nooit gebeur het nie – asof Harry vir Ron vir die eerste keer sedert hy kampioen geword het, ontmoet.

“Jy't die som dus uiteindelik gemaak,” sê Harry kil. “Het jou lank genoeg gevat.”

Hermien staan senuagtig tussen hulle en kyk van die een na die ander. Ron maak sy mond onseker oop. Harry weet dat Ron op die punt is om verskoning te vra en skielik weet hy dat hy dit nie wil hoor nie.

“Dis oukei,” sê hy voor Ron die woord kan uitkry. “Vergeet daarvan.”

“Nee,” sê Ron, “ek moes nie –”

“Los dit,” sê Harry.

Ron grinnik senuagtig en Harry grinnik terug.

Hermien bars in tranes uit.

“Daar's niks om oor te huil nie!” sê Harry verbysterd vir haar.

“Julle twee is so *simpel*!” skree sy terwyl sy haar voet op die grond stamp en die tranes oor haar kleed loop. Toe, voor enigeen van hulle haar kan keer, gee sy vir elkeen 'n drukkies en hardloop daarna huil-huil weg.

“Mal,” sê Ron kopskuddend. “Komaan, Harry, hulle gaan jou telling wys . . .”

Toe Harry die goue eier en sy Vuurslag optel, voel hy baie meer opgetoë as wat hy 'n uur gelede ooit kon dink moontlik sou wees. Hy koes by die tent uit met Ron wat onophoudelik gesels aan sy sy.

“Jy was die beste, weet jy, geen kompetisie nie. Cedric het hierdie snaakse ding met 'n klip daar op die grond gedoen . . . het dit in 'n hond getransfigureer . . . het probeer om die draak te kry om die hond te jaag pleks van vir hom en dit het soort van gewerk, hy het darem die eier gekry, maar hy's gebrand ook – die draak het halfpad van plan verander

en besluit om eerder vir hom as vir die labrador te gaan en hy't net-net weggekom. En daardie Fleur-vroumens het 'n soort towerspreuk probeer, ek dink sy't probeer om die ding in 'n beswyming te kry – wel, dit het ook soort van gewerk, die ding het half slaperig geword, maar toe los dit 'n snork en hierdie lang straal vlamme skiet uit en haar romp slaan aan die brand – sy't dit met water uit haar towerstaf geblus. En Krum – jy sal dit nie glo nie, maar hy't nie eens aan vlieg gedink nie! Hoewel, ek moet sê, hy was seker die beste na jou. Het dit met 'n soort towerspreuk vol in die oog getref. Al probleem is dat die ding so rondgetrap het dat die helfte van die eiers stukkend is – hulle het daarvoor punte afgetrek, want hy was nie veronderstel om hulle enige skade aan te doen nie.”

Ron haal diep asem toe hy en Harry aan die kant van die kamp kom. Noudat die Horingstert weggeneem is, kan Harry sien waar die vyf beoordelaars sit – reg aan die ander kant, in hoë sitplekke wat met goud gedrapeer is.

“Dis punte uit tien van elkeen van hulle,” sê Ron en toe Harry oor die veld loer, sien hy hoe die eerste beoordelaar – Madame Maxine – haar towerstaf in die lug hou. Iets wat soos 'n lang silwer lint lyk, skiet daaruit en maak 'n knoop in die vorm van 'n agt.

“Nie sleg nie!” sê Ron toe die skare juig. “Sy't seker punte vir jou skouer afgetrek . . .”

Mnr. Crouch is volgende aan die beurt. Hy stuur 'n nommer nege die lug in.

“Lyk goed!” gil Ron en slaan Harry op die rug.

Toe kom Dompeldorius. Ook hy gee 'n nege. Nou juig die skare nog harder as tevore.

Ludo Bagman – tien.

“Tien?” sê Harry ongelowig. “Maar . . . ek het seergekry . . . wat's sy storie?”

“Harry, moenie kla nie!” gil Ron opgewonde.

Toe lig Karkaroff sy towerstaf. Hy aarsel 'n oomblik en toe skiet 'n getal uit sy towerstaf – vier.

“Wat?” bulder Ron briesend. “Vier? Jou mislike, partydige gemors, jy't vir Krum 'n tien gegee!”

Harry gee egter nie om nie, al het Karkaroff ook vir hom nul gegee, sou dit nie vir hom saak gemaak het nie; vir hom is Ron se verontwaardiging om sy onthalwe ten minste 'n honderd punte werd. Hy sê dit natuurlik nie vir Ron nie, maar sy hart voel heerlik lig toe hy omdraai en by die kamp uitstap. En dis nie net Ron nie . . . dis nie net die Griffindors in die skare wat hom toejuig nie. Noudat sake op die keper gekom het, noudat hulle weet wat hom in die gesig staar, is die grootste gedeelte van die skool aan sy kant, sowel as aan Cedric s'n . . . die Slibberins kan hom regtig nie skeel nie, wat hulle ook al na hom toe mag slinger, kan hy hanteer.

“Julle is saam eerste, Harry! Jy en Krum!” sê Charlie Weasley toe hy haastig na hulle toe aangestap kom voor hulle weer terug skool toe moet gaan. “Luister, ek moet spore maak, ek moet vir Ma ’n uil stuur, ek het belowe ek sal haar laat weet wat gebeur het – maar dit was ongelooflik! O ja – ek moet vir jou sê jy moet nog ’n paar minute hier rondhang . . . Bagman wil glo iets vir jou in die kampioene se tent sê.”

Ron sê dat hy sal wag, dus gaan Harry weer na die tent wat nou heeltemal anders lyk, vriendelik en verwelkomend. Hy dink terug aan hoe dit gevoel het om daardie Horingstert te probeer ontwyk en vergelyk dit met die lang gewag voor hy kon uitstap om dit te takel . . . daar is net geen vergelyking nie, die gewag was baie erger.

Fleur, Cedric en Krum kom almal saam in.

Die een kant van Cedric se gesig is bedek met ’n dik oranje pasta, seker om sy brandwond te genees. Hy grinnik vir Harry toe hy hom sien. “Goeie werk, Harry.”

“Jy ook,” sê Harry ook met ’n glimlag.

“Skote, vir *almal* van julle!” sê Ludo Bagman toe hy die tent binnegebons kom en so in sy skik met homself lyk dat ’n mens sou sê dat hy persoonlik verby ’n draak gekom het. “Net gou ’n vinnige paar woorde. Julle het ’n lekker lang blaaskans voor die tweede taak om halftien op die oggend van die vier-en-twintigste Februarie sal plaasvind – maar ons gee julle intussen iets om oor te dink! Kyk mooi na daardie goue eiers wat julle daar vashou, dan sal julle sien dat hulle kan oopgaan . . . sien die skarniere? Julle moet die leidraad binne-in daardie eier oplos – dit sal vir julle sê wat die tweede taak is en julle in staat stel om julle voor te berei! Reg so? Seker? Wel, weg is julle!”

Harry stap by die tent uit, sluit by Ron aan en hulle stap gesels-gesels terug om die kant van die Woud; Harry wil alles hoor wat die ander kampioene gedoen het. Toe hulle om die groepie bome kom van waar Harry die drake die eerste keer hoor brul het, spring ’n heks agter die bome uit.

Dit is Rika Skinner. Vandag het sy ’n skelgroen kleed aan sodat die Kitskrabbeveerpen in haar hand daarmee versmelt.

“Veels geluk, Harry!” sê sy stralend. “Ek wonder of ons ’n vinnige woordjie kan wissel? Hoe het dit gevoel om teen daardie draak te staan te kom? Hoe voel jy *nou* oor die billikheid van die telling?”

“Ja, ons kan ’n woordjie wissel,” sê Harry bruusk. “*Tot siens.*”

Toe sit hy af kasteel toe saam met Ron.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



THE HOUSE-ELF LIBERATION FRONT

Harry, Ron, and Hermione went up to the Owlery that evening to find Pigwidgeon, so that Harry could send Sirius a letter telling him that he had managed to get past his dragon unscathed. On the way, Harry filled Ron in on everything Sirius had told him about Karkaroff. Though shocked at first to hear that Karkaroff had been a Death Eater, by the time they entered the Owlery Ron was saying that they ought to have suspected it all along.

“Fits, doesn’t it?” he said. “Remember what Malfoy said on the train, about his dad being friends with Karkaroff? Now we know where they knew each other. They were probably running around in

masks together at the World Cup. . . . I'll tell you one thing, though, Harry, if it *was* Karkaroff who put your name in the goblet, he's going to be feeling really stupid now, isn't he? Didn't work, did it? You only got a scratch! Come here — I'll do it —”

Pigwidgeon was so overexcited at the idea of a delivery he was flying around and around Harry's head, hooting incessantly. Ron snatched Pigwidgeon out of the air and held him still while Harry attached the letter to his leg.

“There's no way any of the other tasks are going to be that dangerous, how could they be?” Ron went on as he carried Pigwidgeon to the window. “You know what? I reckon you could win this tournament, Harry, I'm serious.”

Harry knew that Ron was only saying this to make up for his behavior of the last few weeks, but he appreciated it all the same. Hermione, however, leaned against the Owlery wall, folded her arms, and frowned at Ron.

“Harry's got a long way to go before he finishes this tournament,” she said seriously. “If that was the first task, I hate to think what's coming next.”

“Right little ray of sunshine, aren't you?” said Ron. “You and Professor Trelawney should get together sometime.”

He threw Pigwidgeon out of the window. Pigwidgeon plummeted twelve feet before managing to pull himself back up again; the letter attached to his leg was much longer and heavier than usual — Harry hadn't been able to resist giving Sirius a blow-by-blow account of exactly how he had swerved, circled, and dodged the Horntail. They watched Pigwidgeon disappear into the darkness, and then Ron said,

“Well, we’d better get downstairs for your surprise party, Harry — Fred and George should have nicked enough food from the kitchens by now.”

Sure enough, when they entered the Gryffindor common room it exploded with cheers and yells again. There were mountains of cakes and flagons of pumpkin juice and butterbeer on every surface; Lee Jordan had let off some Filibuster’s Fireworks, so that the air was thick with stars and sparks; and Dean Thomas, who was very good at drawing, had put up some impressive new banners, most of which depicted Harry zooming around the Horntail’s head on his Firebolt, though a couple showed Cedric with his head on fire.

Harry helped himself to food; he had almost forgotten what it was like to feel properly hungry, and sat down with Ron and Hermione. He couldn’t believe how happy he felt; he had Ron back on his side, he’d gotten through the first task, and he wouldn’t have to face the second one for three months.

“Blimey, this is heavy,” said Lee Jordan, picking up the golden egg, which Harry had left on a table, and weighing it in his hands. “Open it, Harry, go on! Let’s just see what’s inside it!”

“He’s supposed to work out the clue on his own,” Hermione said swiftly. “It’s in the tournament rules. . . .”

“I was supposed to work out how to get past the dragon on my own too,” Harry muttered, so only Hermione could hear him, and she grinned rather guiltily.

“Yeah, go on, Harry, open it!” several people echoed.

Lee passed Harry the egg, and Harry dug his fingernails into the groove that ran all the way around it and prised it open.

It was hollow and completely empty — but the moment Harry opened it, the most horrible noise, a loud and screechy wailing, filled the room. The nearest thing to it Harry had ever heard was the ghost orchestra at Nearly Headless Nick's deathday party, who had all been playing the musical saw.

"Shut it!" Fred bellowed, his hands over his ears.

"What was that?" said Seamus Finnigan, staring at the egg as Harry slammed it shut again. "Sounded like a banshee. . . . Maybe you've got to get past one of those next, Harry!"

"It was someone being tortured!" said Neville, who had gone very white and spilled sausage rolls all over the floor. "You're going to have to fight the Cruciatus Curse!"

"Don't be a prat, Neville, that's illegal," said George. "They wouldn't use the Cruciatus Curse on the champions. I thought it sounded a bit like Percy singing . . . maybe you've got to attack him while he's in the shower, Harry."

"Want a jam tart, Hermione?" said Fred.

Hermione looked doubtfully at the plate he was offering her. Fred grinned.

"It's all right," he said. "I haven't done anything to them. It's the custard creams you've got to watch —"

Neville, who had just bitten into a custard cream, choked and spat it out. Fred laughed.

"Just my little joke, Neville. . . ."

Hermione took a jam tart. Then she said, "Did you get all this from the kitchens, Fred?"

"Yep," said Fred, grinning at her. He put on a high-pitched squeak

and imitated a house-elf. ““Anything we can get you, sir, anything at all!’ They’re dead helpful . . . get me a roast ox if I said I was peckish.”

“How do you get in there?” Hermione said in an innocently casual sort of voice.

“Easy,” said Fred, “concealed door behind a painting of a bowl of fruit. Just tickle the pear, and it giggles and —” He stopped and looked suspiciously at her. “Why?”

“Nothing,” said Hermione quickly.

“Going to try and lead the house-elves out on strike now, are you?” said George. “Going to give up all the leaflet stuff and try and stir them up into rebellion?”

Several people chortled. Hermione didn’t answer.

“Don’t you go upsetting them and telling them they’ve got to take clothes and salaries!” said Fred warningly. “You’ll put them off their cooking!”

Just then, Neville caused a slight diversion by turning into a large canary.

“Oh — sorry, Neville!” Fred shouted over all the laughter. “I forgot — it *was* the custard creams we hexed —”

Within a minute, however, Neville had molted, and once his feathers had fallen off, he reappeared looking entirely normal. He even joined in laughing.

“Canary Creams!” Fred shouted to the excitable crowd. “George and I invented them — seven Sickles each, a bargain!”

It was nearly one in the morning when Harry finally went up to the dormitory with Ron, Neville, Seamus, and Dean. Before he pulled

the curtains of his four-poster shut, Harry set his tiny model of the Hungarian Horntail on the table next to his bed, where it yawned, curled up, and closed its eyes. *Really*, Harry thought, as he pulled the hangings on his four-poster closed, *Hagrid had a point . . . they were all right, really, dragons. . . .*

The start of December brought wind and sleet to Hogwarts. Drafty though the castle always was in winter, Harry was glad of its fires and thick walls every time he passed the Durmstrang ship on the lake, which was pitching in the high winds, its black sails billowing against the dark skies. He thought the Beauxbatons caravan was likely to be pretty chilly too. Hagrid, he noticed, was keeping Madame Maxime's horses well provided with their preferred drink of single-malt whiskey; the fumes wafting from the trough in the corner of their paddock was enough to make the entire Care of Magical Creatures class light-headed. This was unhelpful, as they were still tending the horrible skrewts and needed their wits about them.

"I'm not sure whether they hibernate or not," Hagrid told the shivering class in the windy pumpkin patch next lesson. "Thought we'd jus' try an' see if they fancied a kip . . . we'll jus' settle 'em down in these boxes. . . ."

There were now only ten skrewts left; apparently their desire to kill one another had not been exercised out of them. Each of them was now approaching six feet in length. Their thick gray armor; their powerful, scuttling legs; their fire-blasting ends; their stings and their suckers, combined to make the skrewts the most repulsive things Harry had ever seen. The class looked dispiritedly at the enormous

boxes Hagrid had brought out, all lined with pillows and fluffy blankets.

“We’ll jus’ lead ’em in here,” Hagrid said, “an’ put the lids on, and we’ll see what happens.”

But the skrewts, it transpired, did *not* hibernate, and did not appreciate being forced into pillow-lined boxes and nailed in. Hagrid was soon yelling, “Don’ panic, now, don’ panic!” while the skrewts rampaged around the pumpkin patch, now strewn with the smoldering wreckage of the boxes. Most of the class — Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle in the lead — had fled into Hagrid’s cabin through the back door and barricaded themselves in; Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, were among those who remained outside trying to help Hagrid. Together they managed to restrain and tie up nine of the skrewts, though at the cost of numerous burns and cuts; finally, only one skrewt was left.

“Don’ frighten him, now!” Hagrid shouted as Ron and Harry used their wands to shoot jets of fiery sparks at the skrewt, which was advancing menacingly on them, its sting arched, quivering, over its back. “Jus’ try an’ slip the rope ’round his sting, so he won’ hurt any o’ the others!”

“Yeah, we wouldn’t want that!” Ron shouted angrily as he and Harry backed into the wall of Hagrid’s cabin, still holding the skrewt off with their sparks.

“Well, well, well . . . this *does* look like fun.”

Rita Skeeter was leaning on Hagrid’s garden fence, looking in at the mayhem. She was wearing a thick magenta cloak with a furry purple collar today, and her crocodile-skin handbag was over her

arm.

Hagrid launched himself forward on top of the skrewt that was cornering Harry and Ron and flattened it; a blast of fire shot out of its end, withering the pumpkin plants nearby.

“Who’re you?” Hagrid asked Rita Skeeter as he slipped a loop of rope around the skrewt’s sting and tightened it.

“Rita Skeeter, *Daily Prophet* reporter,” Rita replied, beaming at him. Her gold teeth glinted.

“Thought Dumbledore said you weren’ allowed inside the school anymore,” said Hagrid, frowning slightly as he got off the slightly squashed skrewt and started tugging it over to its fellows.

Rita acted as though she hadn’t heard what Hagrid had said.

“What are these fascinating creatures called?” she asked, beaming still more widely.

“Blast-Ended Skrewts,” grunted Hagrid.

“Really?” said Rita, apparently full of lively interest. “I’ve never heard of them before . . . where do they come from?”

Harry noticed a dull red flush rising up out of Hagrid’s wild black beard, and his heart sank. Where *had* Hagrid got the skrewts from? Hermione, who seemed to be thinking along these lines, said quickly, “They’re very interesting, aren’t they? Aren’t they, Harry?”

“What? Oh yeah . . . ouch . . . interesting,” said Harry as she stepped on his foot.

“Ah, *you’re* here, Harry!” said Rita Skeeter as she looked around. “So you like Care of Magical Creatures, do you? One of your favorite lessons?”

“Yes,” said Harry stoutly. Hagrid beamed at him.

“Lovely,” said Rita. “Really lovely. Been teaching long?” she added to Hagrid.

Harry noticed her eyes travel over Dean (who had a nasty cut across one cheek), Lavender (whose robes were badly singed), Seamus (who was nursing several burnt fingers), and then to the cabin windows, where most of the class stood, their noses pressed against the glass waiting to see if the coast was clear.

“This is on’y me second year,” said Hagrid.

“Lovely . . . I don’t suppose you’d like to give an interview, would you? Share some of your experience of magical creatures? The *Prophet* does a zoological column every Wednesday, as I’m sure you know. We could feature these — er — Bang-Ended Scoots.”

“Blast-Ended Skrewts,” Hagrid said eagerly. “Er — yeah, why not?”

Harry had a very bad feeling about this, but there was no way of communicating it to Hagrid without Rita Skeeter seeing, so he had to stand and watch in silence as Hagrid and Rita Skeeter made arrangements to meet in the Three Broomsticks for a good long interview later that week. Then the bell rang up at the castle, signaling the end of the lesson.

“Well, good-bye, Harry!” Rita Skeeter called merrily to him as he set off with Ron and Hermione. “Until Friday night, then, Hagrid!”

“She’ll twist everything he says,” Harry said under his breath.

“Just as long as he didn’t import those skrewts illegally or anything,” said Hermione desperately. They looked at one another — it was exactly the sort of thing Hagrid might do.

“Hagrid’s been in loads of trouble before, and Dumbledore’s

never sacked him,” said Ron consolingly. “Worst that can happen is Hagrid’ll have to get rid of the skrewts. Sorry . . . did I say worst? I meant best.”

Harry and Hermione laughed, and, feeling slightly more cheerful, went off to lunch.

Harry thoroughly enjoyed double Divination that afternoon; they were still doing star charts and predictions, but now that he and Ron were friends once more, the whole thing seemed very funny again. Professor Trelawney, who had been so pleased with the pair of them when they had been predicting their own horrific deaths, quickly became irritated as they sniggered through her explanation of the various ways in which Pluto could disrupt everyday life.

“I would *think*,” she said, in a mystical whisper that did not conceal her obvious annoyance, “that *some* of us” — she stared very meaningfully at Harry — “might be a little less *frivolous* had they seen what I have seen during my crystal gazing last night. As I sat here, absorbed in my needlework, the urge to consult the orb overpowered me. I arose, I settled myself before it, and I gazed into its crystalline depths . . . and what do you think I saw gazing back at me?”

“An ugly old bat in outsize specs?” Ron muttered under his breath. Harry fought hard to keep his face straight.

“*Death*, my dears.”

Parvati and Lavender both put their hands over their mouths, looking horrified.

“Yes,” said Professor Trelawney, nodding impressively, “it comes, ever closer, it circles overhead like a vulture, ever lower . . . ever

lower over the castle. . . .”

She stared pointedly at Harry, who yawned very widely and obviously.

“It’d be a bit more impressive if she hadn’t done it about eighty times before,” Harry said as they finally regained the fresh air of the staircase beneath Professor Trelawney’s room. “But if I’d dropped dead every time she’s told me I’m going to, I’d be a medical miracle.”

“You’d be a sort of extra-concentrated ghost,” said Ron, chortling, as they passed the Bloody Baron going in the opposite direction, his wide eyes staring sinisterly. “At least we didn’t get homework. I hope Hermione got loads off Professor Vector, I love not working when she is. . . .”

But Hermione wasn’t at dinner, nor was she in the library when they went to look for her afterward. The only person in there was Viktor Krum. Ron hovered behind the bookshelves for a while, watching Krum, debating in whispers with Harry whether he should ask for an autograph — but then Ron realized that six or seven girls were lurking in the next row of books, debating exactly the same thing, and he lost his enthusiasm for the idea.

“Wonder where she’s got to?” Ron said as he and Harry went back to Gryffindor Tower.

“Dunno . . . balderdash.”

But the Fat Lady had barely begun to swing forward when the sound of racing feet behind them announced Hermione’s arrival.

“Harry!” she panted, skidding to a halt beside him (the Fat Lady stared down at her, eyebrows raised). “Harry, you’ve got to come —

you've *got* to come, the most amazing thing's happened — please —”

She seized Harry's arm and started to try to drag him back along the corridor.

“What's the matter?” Harry said.

“I'll show you when we get there — oh come on, quick —”

Harry looked around at Ron; he looked back at Harry, intrigued.

“Okay,” Harry said, starting off back down the corridor with Hermione, Ron hurrying to keep up.

“Oh don't mind me!” the Fat Lady called irritably after them. “Don't apologize for bothering me! I'll just hang here, wide open, until you get back, shall I?”

“Yeah, thanks!” Ron shouted over his shoulder.

“Hermione, where are we going?” Harry asked, after she had led them down through six floors, and started down the marble staircase into the entrance hall.

“You'll see, you'll see in a minute!” said Hermione excitedly.

She turned left at the bottom of the staircase and hurried toward the door through which Cedric Diggory had gone the night after the Goblet of Fire had regurgitated his and Harry's names. Harry had never been through here before. He and Ron followed Hermione down a flight of stone steps, but instead of ending up in a gloomy underground passage like the one that led to Snape's dungeon, they found themselves in a broad stone corridor, brightly lit with torches, and decorated with cheerful paintings that were mainly of food.

“Oh hang on . . .” said Harry slowly, halfway down the corridor. “Wait a minute, Hermione. . . .”

“What?” She turned around to look at him, anticipation all over her

face.

“I know what this is about,” said Harry.

He nudged Ron and pointed to the painting just behind Hermione. It showed a gigantic silver fruit bowl.

“Hermione!” said Ron, cottoning on. “You’re trying to rope us into that spew stuff again!”

“No, no, I’m not!” she said hastily. “And it’s not *spew*, Ron —”

“Changed the name, have you?” said Ron, frowning at her. “What are we now, then, the House-Elf Liberation Front? I’m not barging into that kitchen and trying to make them stop work, I’m not doing it —”

“I’m not asking you to!” Hermione said impatiently. “I came down here just now, to talk to them all, and I found — oh come *on*, Harry, I want to show you!”

She seized his arm again, pulled him in front of the picture of the giant fruit bowl, stretched out her forefinger, and tickled the huge green pear. It began to squirm, chuckling, and suddenly turned into a large green door handle. Hermione seized it, pulled the door open, and pushed Harry hard in the back, forcing him inside.

He had one brief glimpse of an enormous, high-ceilinged room, large as the Great Hall above it, with mounds of glittering brass pots and pans heaped around the stone walls, and a great brick fireplace at the other end, when something small hurtled toward him from the middle of the room, squealing, “Harry Potter, sir! *Harry Potter!*”

Next second all the wind had been knocked out of him as the squealing elf hit him hard in the midriff, hugging him so tightly he thought his ribs would break.

“D-Dobby?” Harry gasped.

“It *is* Dobby, sir, it is!” squealed the voice from somewhere around his navel. “Dobby has been hoping and hoping to see Harry Potter, sir, and Harry Potter has come to see him, sir!”

Dobby let go and stepped back a few paces, beaming up at Harry, his enormous, green, tennis-ball-shaped eyes brimming with tears of happiness. He looked almost exactly as Harry remembered him; the pencil-shaped nose, the batlike ears, the long fingers and feet — all except the clothes, which were very different.

When Dobby had worked for the Malfoys, he had always worn the same filthy old pillowcase. Now, however, he was wearing the strangest assortment of garments Harry had ever seen; he had done an even worse job of dressing himself than the wizards at the World Cup. He was wearing a tea cozy for a hat, on which he had pinned a number of bright badges; a tie patterned with horseshoes over a bare chest, a pair of what looked like children’s soccer shorts, and odd socks. One of these, Harry saw, was the black one Harry had removed from his own foot and tricked Mr. Malfoy into giving Dobby, thereby setting Dobby free. The other was covered in pink and orange stripes.

“Dobby, what’re you doing here?” Harry said in amazement.

“Dobby has come to work at Hogwarts, sir!” Dobby squealed excitedly. “Professor Dumbledore gave Dobby and Winky jobs, sir!”

“Winky?” said Harry. “She’s here too?”

“Yes, sir, yes!” said Dobby, and he seized Harry’s hand and pulled him off into the kitchen between the four long wooden tables that stood there. Each of these tables, Harry noticed as he passed them,

was positioned exactly beneath the four House tables above, in the Great Hall. At the moment, they were clear of food, dinner having finished, but he supposed that an hour ago they had been laden with dishes that were then sent up through the ceiling to their counterparts above.

At least a hundred little elves were standing around the kitchen, beaming, bowing, and curtsying as Dobby led Harry past them. They were all wearing the same uniform: a tea towel stamped with the Hogwarts crest, and tied, as Winky's had been, like a toga.

Dobby stopped in front of the brick fireplace and pointed.

"Winky, sir!" he said.

Winky was sitting on a stool by the fire. Unlike Dobby, she had obviously not foraged for clothes. She was wearing a neat little skirt and blouse with a matching blue hat, which had holes in it for her large ears. However, while every one of Dobby's strange collection of garments was so clean and well cared for that it looked brand-new, Winky was plainly not taking care of her clothes at all. There were soup stains all down her blouse and a burn in her skirt.

"Hello, Winky," said Harry.

Winky's lip quivered. Then she burst into tears, which spilled out of her great brown eyes and splashed down her front, just as they had done at the Quidditch World Cup.

"Oh dear," said Hermione. She and Ron had followed Harry and Dobby to the end of the kitchen. "Winky, don't cry, please don't . . ."

But Winky cried harder than ever. Dobby, on the other hand, beamed up at Harry.

"Would Harry Potter like a cup of tea?" he squeaked loudly, over

Winky's sobs.

"Er — yeah, okay," said Harry.

Instantly, about six house-elves came trotting up behind him, bearing a large silver tray laden with a teapot, cups for Harry, Ron, and Hermione, a milk jug, and a large plate of biscuits.

"Good service!" Ron said, in an impressed voice. Hermione frowned at him, but the elves all looked delighted; they bowed very low and retreated.

"How long have you been here, Dobby?" Harry asked as Dobby handed around the tea.

"Only a week, Harry Potter, sir!" said Dobby happily. "Dobby came to see Professor Dumbledore, sir. You see, sir, it is very difficult for a house-elf who has been dismissed to get a new position, sir, very difficult indeed —"

At this, Winky howled even harder, her squashed-tomato of a nose dribbling all down her front, though she made no effort to stem the flow.

"Dobby has traveled the country for two whole years, sir, trying to find work!" Dobby squeaked. "But Dobby hasn't found work, sir, because Dobby wants paying now!"

The house-elves all around the kitchen, who had been listening and watching with interest, all looked away at these words, as though Dobby had said something rude and embarrassing. Hermione, however, said, "Good for you, Dobby!"

"Thank you, miss!" said Dobby, grinning toothily at her. "But most wizards doesn't want a house-elf who wants paying, miss. 'That's not the point of a house-elf,' they says, and they slammed the door in

Dobby's face! Dobby likes work, but he wants to wear clothes and he wants to be paid, Harry Potter. . . . Dobby likes being free!"

The Hogwarts house-elves had now started edging away from Dobby, as though he were carrying something contagious. Winky, however, remained where she was, though there was a definite increase in the volume of her crying.

"And then, Harry Potter, Dobby goes to visit Winky, and finds out Winky has been freed too, sir!" said Dobby delightedly.

At this, Winky flung herself forward off her stool and lay facedown on the flagged stone floor, beating her tiny fists upon it and positively screaming with misery. Hermione hastily dropped down to her knees beside her and tried to comfort her, but nothing she said made the slightest difference. Dobby continued with his story, shouting shrilly over Winky's screeches.

"And then Dobby had the idea, Harry Potter, sir! 'Why doesn't Dobby and Winky find work together?' Dobby says. 'Where is there enough work for two house-elves?' says Winky. And Dobby thinks, and it comes to him, sir! *Hogwarts!* So Dobby and Winky came to see Professor Dumbledore, sir, and Professor Dumbledore took us on!"

Dobby beamed very brightly, and happy tears welled in his eyes again.

"And Professor Dumbledore says he will pay Dobby, sir, if Dobby wants paying! And so Dobby is a free elf, sir, and Dobby gets a Galleon a week and one day off a month!"

"That's not very much!" Hermione shouted indignantly from the floor, over Winky's continued screaming and fist-beating.

“Professor Dumbledore offered Dobby ten Galleons a week, and weekends off,” said Dobby, suddenly giving a little shiver, as though the prospect of so much leisure and riches were frightening, “but Dobby beat him down, miss. . . . Dobby likes freedom, miss, but he isn’t wanting too much, miss, he likes work better.”

“And how much is Professor Dumbledore paying *you*, Winky?” Hermione asked kindly.

If she had thought this would cheer up Winky, she was wildly mistaken. Winky did stop crying, but when she sat up she was glaring at Hermione through her massive brown eyes, her whole face sopping wet and suddenly furious.

“Winky is a disgraced elf, but Winky is not yet getting paid!” she squeaked. “Winky is not sunk so low as that! Winky is properly ashamed of being freed!”

“Ashamed?” said Hermione blankly. “But — Winky, come on! It’s Mr. Crouch who should be ashamed, not you! You didn’t do anything wrong, he was really horrible to you —”

But at these words, Winky clapped her hands over the holes in her hat, flattening her ears so that she couldn’t hear a word, and screeched, “You is not insulting my master, miss! You is not insulting Mr. Crouch! Mr. Crouch is a good wizard, miss! Mr. Crouch is right to sack bad Winky!”

“Winky is having trouble adjusting, Harry Potter,” squeaked Dobby confidentially. “Winky forgets she is not bound to Mr. Crouch anymore; she is allowed to speak her mind now, but she won’t do it.”

“Can’t house-elves speak their minds about their masters, then?” Harry asked.

“Oh no, sir, no,” said Dobby, looking suddenly serious. “’Tis part of the house-elf’s enslavement, sir. We keeps their secrets and our silence, sir. We upholds the family’s honor, and we never speaks ill of them — though Professor Dumbledore told Dobby he does not insist upon this. Professor Dumbledore said we is free to — to —”

Dobby looked suddenly nervous and beckoned Harry closer. Harry bent forward. Dobby whispered, “He said we is free to call him a — a barmy old codger if we likes, sir!”

Dobby gave a frightened sort of giggle.

“But Dobby is not wanting to, Harry Potter,” he said, talking normally again, and shaking his head so that his ears flapped. “Dobby likes Professor Dumbledore very much, sir, and is proud to keep his secrets and our silence for him.”

“But you can say what you like about the Malfoys now?” Harry asked him, grinning.

A slightly fearful look came into Dobby’s immense eyes.

“Dobby — Dobby could,” he said doubtfully. He squared his small shoulders. “Dobby could tell Harry Potter that his old masters were — were — *bad Dark wizards!*”

Dobby stood for a moment, quivering all over, horror-struck by his own daring — then he rushed over to the nearest table and began banging his head on it very hard, squealing, “*Bad Dobby! Bad Dobby!*”

Harry seized Dobby by the back of his tie and pulled him away from the table.

“Thank you, Harry Potter, thank you,” said Dobby breathlessly, rubbing his head.

“You just need a bit of practice,” Harry said.

“Practice!” squealed Winky furiously. “You is ought to be ashamed of yourself, Dobby, talking that way about your masters!”

“They isn’t my masters anymore, Winky!” said Dobby defiantly. “Dobby doesn’t care what they think anymore!”

“Oh you is a bad elf, Dobby!” moaned Winky, tears leaking down her face once more. “My poor Mr. Crouch, what is he doing without Winky? He is needing me, he is needing my help! I is looking after the Crouches all my life, and my mother is doing it before me, and my grandmother is doing it before her . . . oh what is they saying if they knew Winky was freed? Oh the shame, the shame!” She buried her face in her skirt again and bawled.

“Winky,” said Hermione firmly, “I’m quite sure Mr. Crouch is getting along perfectly well without you. We’ve seen him, you know —”

“You is seeing my master?” said Winky breathlessly, raising her tearstained face out of her skirt once more and goggling at Hermione. “You is seeing him here at Hogwarts?”

“Yes,” said Hermione, “he and Mr. Bagman are judges in the Triwizard Tournament.”

“Mr. Bagman comes too?” squeaked Winky, and to Harry’s great surprise (and Ron’s and Hermione’s too, by the looks on their faces), she looked angry again. “Mr. Bagman is a bad wizard! A very bad wizard! My master isn’t liking him, oh no, not at all!”

“Bagman — bad?” said Harry.

“Oh yes,” Winky said, nodding her head furiously. “My master is telling Winky some things! But Winky is not saying . . . Winky —

Winky keeps her master's secrets. . . .”

She dissolved yet again in tears; they could hear her sobbing into her skirt, “Poor master, poor master, no Winky to help him no more!”

They couldn't get another sensible word out of Winky. They left her to her crying and finished their tea, while Dobby chatted happily about his life as a free elf and his plans for his wages.

“Dobby is going to buy a sweater next, Harry Potter!” he said happily, pointing at his bare chest.

“Tell you what, Dobby,” said Ron, who seemed to have taken a great liking to the elf, “I'll give you the one my mum knits me this Christmas, I always get one from her. You don't mind maroon, do you?”

Dobby was delighted.

“We might have to shrink it a bit to fit you,” Ron told him, “but it'll go well with your tea cozy.”

As they prepared to take their leave, many of the surrounding elves pressed in upon them, offering snacks to take back upstairs. Hermione refused, with a pained look at the way the elves kept bowing and curtsying, but Harry and Ron loaded their pockets with cream cakes and pies.

“Thanks a lot!” Harry said to the elves, who had all clustered around the door to say good night. “See you, Dobby!”

“Harry Potter . . . can Dobby come and see you sometimes, sir?” Dobby asked tentatively.

“Course you can,” said Harry, and Dobby beamed.

“You know what?” said Ron, once he, Hermione, and Harry had left the kitchens behind and were climbing the steps into the entrance

hall again. “All these years I’ve been really impressed with Fred and George, nicking food from the kitchens — well, it’s not exactly difficult, is it? They can’t wait to give it away!”

“I think this is the best thing that could have happened to those elves, you know,” said Hermione, leading the way back up the marble staircase. “Dobby coming to work here, I mean. The other elves will see how happy he is, being free, and slowly it’ll dawn on them that they want that too!”

“Let’s hope they don’t look too closely at Winky,” said Harry.

“Oh she’ll cheer up,” said Hermione, though she sounded a bit doubtful. “Once the shock’s worn off, and she’s got used to Hogwarts, she’ll see how much better off she is without that Crouch man.”

“She seems to love him,” said Ron thickly (he had just started on a cream cake).

“Doesn’t think much of Bagman, though, does she?” said Harry. “Wonder what Crouch says at home about him?”

“Probably says he’s not a very good Head of Department,” said Hermione, “and let’s face it . . . he’s got a point, hasn’t he?”

“I’d still rather work for him than old Crouch,” said Ron. “At least Bagman’s got a sense of humor.”

“Don’t let Percy hear you saying that,” Hermione said, smiling slightly.

“Yeah, well, Percy wouldn’t want to work for anyone with a sense of humor, would he?” said Ron, now starting on a chocolate eclair. “Percy wouldn’t recognize a joke if it danced naked in front of him wearing Dobby’s tea cozy.”

Die Huiselfbevrydingsfront

Daardie aand gaan Harry, Ron en Hermien na die Uilhuis om vir Pigwidgeon in die hande te kry sodat Harry vir Sirius 'n brief kan stuur om hom te vertel dat hy ongedeerd verby die draak gekom het. Op pad soontoe vertel Harry vir Ron alles wat Sirius vir hom oor Karkaroff gesê het. Hoewel Ron aanvanklik geskok is toe hy hoor dat Karkaroff 'n Doodseter was, sê hy teen die tyd dat hulle by die Uilhuis aankom dat hulle dit eintlik moes vermoed het.

“Dit pas in, nie waar nie?” sê hy. “Onthou jy dat Malfoy op die trein gesê het dat sy pa vriende met Karkaroff is? Nou weet ons waarvandaan hulle mekaar ken. Hulle het heel waarskynlik daar by die Wêreldbeker saam in maskers rondgehardloop . . . Ek sê vir jou een ding, Harry, as dit regtig Karkaroff was wat jou naam in die Beker gesit het, moet hy nou behoorlik simpel voel, nè? Het nie gewerk nie. Jy't net 'n skrapie gekry! Gee hier – laat ek dit doen –”

Pigwidgeon is so ooropgewonde by die gedagte aan 'n aflewering dat hy al om Harry se kop vlieg terwyl hy onophoudelik hoe-hoe. Ron vang Pigwidgeon in die lug en hou hom vas terwyl Harry die brief aan sy been vasmaak.

“Dis onmoontlik dat enige van die ander take so gevaarlik kan wees, ek bedoel, hoe kan hulle?” gaan Ron voort terwyl hy vir Pigwidgeon na die venster neem. “Weet jy wat? Ek dink jy gaan hierdie Toernooi wen, Harry, ek's ernstig.”

Harry weet dat Ron dit net sê om vir sy gedrag van die afgelope paar weke te vergoed, maar hy waardeer dit nog steeds. Hermien leun egter teen die Uilhuis se muur, vou haar arms en frons vir Ron.

“Harry moet nog 'n ver ent kom voor hy met hierdie Toernooi klaar is,” sê sy ernstig. “As dit die eerste taak is, wil ek nie weet hoe die ander gaan wees nie.”

“Jy's 'n regte sonstraaltjie, hè?” sê Ron. “Jy en professor Trelawney moet 'n bietjie tyd saam deurbring.”

Hy gooi vir Pigwidgeon deur die venster. Pigwidgeon tuimel drie meter ver grond toe voor hy koers kry; die brief aan sy been is baie langer

en swaarder as gewoonlik – Harry kon die versoeking nie weerstaan om Sirius in detail te vertel presies hoe hy geswenk, gesirkel en die Horingstert uitoorlê het nie.

Hulle kyk hoe Pigwidgeon die donkerte in verdwyn en toe sê Ron, “Wel, ons sal ondertoe moet gaan vir jou verrassingspartytjie, Harry – teen dié tyd het Fred en George al genoeg kos uit die kombuis gesteel.”

En sowaar, toe hulle by die Griffindor-geselskamer instap, ontplof dit omtrent met ’n geraas en ’n gejuig. Daar is berge koekies en kanne vol pampoensap en Botterbier op elke moontlike oppervlak; Lee Jordaan steek ’n paar van Dr. Vrijbouter se Ongelooflike Nat en Droë Vuurwerke aan sodat die lug dik is van sterre en vonke, en Dean Thomas, wat baie goed kan teken, het ’n paar indrukwekkende nuwe baniere opgehang. Die meeste wys hoe Harry op sy Vuurslag om die Horingstert se kop vlieg, hoewel daar ook ’n paar van Cedric met ’n brandende kop is.

Harry help homself aan die kos – hy het al amper vergeet hoe dit voel om behoorlik honger te wees – en gaan sit dan by Ron en Hermien. Hy kan nie glo hoe gelukkig hy voel nie; Ron is terug aan sy kant, hy’t die eerste taak oorlewe en hy hoef die tweede een eers oor drie maande te doen.

“Vervlaks, dis swaar,” sê Lee Jordaan toe hy die goue eier wat Harry op ’n tafel neergesit het, optel en in sy hande weeg. “Maak dit oop, toe, Harry! Kom ons kyk wat’s daarin!”

“Hy’s veronderstel om die leidraad op sy eie uit te werk,” sê Hermien vinnig. “Dit staan in die Toernooi se reëls . . .”

“Ek was veronderstel om self uit te werk hoe om verby die draak ook te kom,” mompel Harry sodat net Hermien hom kan hoor en sy grinnik ietwat skuldig.

“Ja, toe, Harry, maak oop!” eggo nog ’n paar mense.

Lee gee die eier vir Harry aan en Harry boor met sy vingernaels in die groef wat reg om die eier loop sodat dit oopgaan.

Dit is hol en heeltemal leeg – maar die oomblik dat Harry dit oop het, kom die aakligste geluid daaruit, ’n harde, kras gekerm wat die hele vertrek vul. Die naaste ding hieraan wat Harry al gehoor het, was die spookorkes wat tydens Nick-amper-sonder-kop se Doodsdagparty op sae musiek gemaak het.

“Maak dit toe!” bulder Fred met sy hande oor sy ore.

“Wat was dit?” sê Septimus Floris terwyl hy na die eier staar wat Harry toegeklap het. “Klink soos ’n doodsbode . . . miskien moet jy volgende keer verby een van hulle kom, Harry!”

“Dit was iemand wat gemartel word!” sê Neville wat baie bleek geword het en ’n klomp worsrolletjies op die vloer laat val het. “Jy sal jou teen die Cruciatus-vloek moet verdedig!”

“Moenie simpel wees nie, Neville, dis onwettig,” sê George. “Hulle sal

nie die Cruciatus-vloek teen die kampioene gebruik nie. Vir my het dit 'n bietjie geklink soos wanneer Percy sing . . . dalk moet jy hom gaan aanval wanneer hy stort, Harry."

"n Konfyttertjie vir jou, Hermien?" sê Fred.

Hermien kyk ietwat onseker na die bord wat hy voor haar hou. Fred grinnik.

"Dit makeer niks," sê hy. "Ek het niks aan hulle gedoen nie. Dis die vlaroompies waarvoor jy moet oppas –"

Neville, wat so pas aan 'n vlaroompie gehap het, stik en spoeg dit uit.

Fred lag. "Net 'n ou grappie, Neville . . ."

Hermien neem 'n konfyttertjie.

Toe sê sy, "Het julle dit alles in die kombuis gekry, Fred?"

"H'm," sê Fred en grinnik vir haar. Hy skakel 'n hoë piepstemmetjie aan en boots 'n huiself na. "Iets wat ons vir jou kan kry, meneer, net wat jy wil hê! Hulle is so hulpvaardig . . . sal vir my 'n gebraaide os gee as ek sê dat ek honger is."

"Hoe't jy ingekom?" sê Hermien op 'n onskuldige, terloopse manier.

"Maklik," sê Fred, "daar's 'n versteekte ingang agter 'n skildery van 'n bak vrugte. Kielie net die peer en as dit giggel –" Hy steek vas en kyk agterdogtig na haar. "Hoekom?"

"Niks," sê Hermien vinnig.

"Gaan jy nou probeer om die huiselwe te oorreed om te staak, hê?" sê George. "Is jy nou klaar met daardie pamflette, gaan jy hulle eerder probeer aanpor om te rebelleer?"

'n Hele paar mense proes. Hermien antwoord nie.

"Waag dit net om hulle te ontstel en te sê dat hulle klere en salarisse moet kry!" sê Fred waarskuwend. "Jy sal hulle afsit van kook."

Op daardie oomblik veroorsaak Neville 'n ligte beroering toe hy in 'n groot geel kanarie verander.

"O – jammer, Neville!" skree Fred bo-oor al die gelag. "Ek het vergeet – dit was toe die vlaroompies wat ons getoor het –"

'n Paar minute later begin Neville egter verveer en toe al sy vere uitgeval het, lyk hy weer net soos gewoonlik. Hy lag selfs saam met hulle.

"Kanarieroompies!" skree Fred vir die opgewonde skare. "Ek en George het hulle uitgevind – sewe Sekels elk, winskoop!"

Dis amper eenuur toe Harry uiteindelik saam met Ron, Neville, Septimus en Dean na die slaapsaal gaan. Voor hy die gordyne om sy hemelbed toetrek, sit Harry die modelletjie van die Hongaarse Horingstert op die tafel langs sy bed neer waar dit gaap, opkrul en haar oë toemaak. Regtig, dink Harry toe hy die behangsels om die bed toemaak, Hagrid is reg . . . drake is eintlik oukei . . .

Die begin van die Desembervakansie bring wind en ysreën na Hogwarts.

Hoewel die kasteel in die winter goed trekkerig is, is Harry dankbaar oor die vure en dik mure elke keer dat hy verby Durmstrang se skip daar op die meer stap. Dit word rondgegooi deur die sterk wind en die swart seile staan bol teen die donker lug. Hy dink dat Beauxbatons se karavaan ook goed koud moet wees. Hy merk dat Hagrid Madame Maxine se perde goed van hul geliefkoosde enkelmoutwhisky voorsien; die walms wat uit die trog in die hoek van die kamp opwel, is genoeg om die hele Versorging van Magiese Kreature-klas lighoofdig te maak. Dit help nie juis nie, want hulle moet die aaklige Krewels nog steeds versorg en daarvoor moet jy op en wakker wees.

“Ek is nie seker of hulle hiberneer of nie,” sê Hagrid by die volgende les in die winderige pampoenland vir die bewende klas. “Het gedink ons moet kyk of hulle ’n uiltjie wil knip . . . Ons kan hulle in hierdie kratte laat rus . . .”

Daar is nog net tien Krewels oor; oefening was blykbaar nie die antwoord op hul drang om mekaar uit te wis nie. Die laaste een is nou twee meter lank. Die kombinasie van dik grys pantsers, kragtige bene om mee weg te kom, vuurspuwende sterte, angels en suiers maak die Krewels die walglikste goed wat Harry nog ooit gesien het. Die hele klas kyk sonder entoesiasme na die enorme kratte vol kussings en donsige komberse wat Hagrid buitentoe dra.

“Ons lei hulle net hier in,” sê Hagrid, “en sit die deksels op, en dan kyk ons wat gebeur.”

Dit blyk egter dat die Krewels *nie* hiberneer nie en ook nie in kratte vol kussings toegespyker wil wees nie. Hagrid skree spoedig, “Moenie paniekerig raak nie, moet net nie paniekerig raak nie!” terwyl die Krewels amok maak in die pampoenland wat nou met smeulende stukke krat besaai is. Die meeste van die ouens in die klas – Malfoy, Krabbe en Goliath aan die voorpunt – het by Hagrid se agterdeur ingeglip en hulself daarbinne verskans; Harry, Ron en Hermien is egter onder diegene wat buite gebly het om Hagrid te probeer help. Etlike brandwonde en snye later slaag hulle saam-saam daarin om nege van die tien Krewels te oorrampel en vas te maak; uiteindelik is nog net een Krewel op vrye voet.

“Moet hom nie bang maak nie!” skree Hagrid toe Ron en Harry hul towerstawwe gebruik om vuurstrale na die Krewel te spuit wat nou dreigend, met sy angel bewend oor sy rug gebuig, op hulle afpyl. “Probeer om die tou om sy angel te kry sodat hy nie die ander kan seermaak nie!”

“Ja, ons wil tog nie hê dit moet gebeur nie!” skree Ron ergerlik toe hy en Harry tot teen die muur van Hagrid se hut terugval terwyl hulle die Krewel nog steeds met vonke probeer afweer.

“Wel, wel, wel . . . en lyk *dit* nie na pret nie.”

Rika Skinner leun oor Hagrid se heining. Sy slaan die chaos gade. Sy

dra 'n dik persrooi mantel met 'n pers pelskraag en haar krokodilvelhandsak hang aan een arm.

Hagrid slinger homself op die Krewel wat Harry en Ron in 'n hoek gekeer het en trek dit plat; 'n vuurstraal skiet uit die stert en verskroei die pampoenplante daar naby.

"Wie is jy?" vra Hagrid vir Rika Skinner terwyl hy 'n toulus om die Krewel se angel glip en dit vastrek.

"Rika Skinner, verslaggewer by die *Daaglikse Profeet*," antwoord Rika stralend. Haar goue tande skitter.

"Gedog Dompeldorius het gesê jy word nie meer by die skool toegelaat nie?" sê Hagrid en frons effens terwyl hy van die platgedrukte Krewel af opstaan en dit na sy makkers begin sleep.

Rika maak asof sy glad nie kon hoor wat Hagrid gesê het nie.

"Wat noem 'n mens hierdie fassinerende kreature?" vra sy en glimlag nog breër.

"Spuitstertkrewels," grom Hagrid.

"Regtig?" sê Rika soos een wat erg belang stel. "Ek het nog nooit van so iets gehoor nie . . . waar kom hulle vandaan?"

Harry sien hoe 'n dowwe rooi gloed onder Hagrid se woeste swart baard verskyn en sy hart sink. Waar het Hagrid die Krewels gekry?

Hermien, wat duidelik oor dieselfde ding wonder, sê vinnig, "Hulle is baie interessant, nè? Wat sê jy, Harry?"

"Wat? O ja . . . eina . . . interessant," sê Harry toe sy op sy voet trap.

"O, jy is ook hier, Harry!" sê Rika Skinner toe sy omkyk. "Jy hou dus van Versorging van Magiese Kreature, of hoe? Een van jou gunstelingvakke?"

"Ja," sê Harry moedig. Hagrid glimlag stralend vir hom.

"Pragtig," sê Rika. "Regtig pragtig. Gee jy al lank onderwys?" vra sy vir Hagrid.

Harry sien hoe haar oë oor Dean speel (wat 'n nare sny aan een wang het), Lavender (wie se kleed lelik geskroei is), Septimus (wat 'n paar verbrande vingers vertroetel) en toe na die hut se venster draai waar die grootste deel van die klas met hul neuse teen die glas gedruk staan en wag dat dinge moet bedaar.

"Dis nou eers my tweede jaar," sê Hagrid.

"Pragtig . . . jy sal seker nie 'n onderhoud wil toestaan nie, of hoe? Van jou ervarings met magiese kreature met ons deel? Soos jy seker weet, is daar elke Woensdag 'n artikel van dierkundige aard in die *Profeet*. Ons kan dalk iets oor hierdie – h'm – Stinkstertkrappe doen."

"Spuitstertkrewels," sê Hagrid gretig. "H'm – ja, hoekom nie?"

Hieroor voel Harry glad nie gerus nie. Daar is egter nie 'n manier om dit aan Hagrid oor te dra sonder dat Rika Skinner iets merk nie, dus moet hy in stilte toekyk hoe Hagrid en Rika Skinner reëlings tref om mekaar

later die week in die Drie Besemstokke vir 'n lekker lang onderhoud te ontmoet. Net toe lui die klok bo in die kasteel vir die einde van die les.

"Wel, tot siens, Harry!" roep Rika Skinner vrolik agter hom aan toe hy, Ron en Hermien hulself uit die voete maak. "Sien jou Vrydagaand, Hagrid!"

"Sy sal alles wat hy sê, verdraai," sê Harry binnensmonds.

"Solank hy daardie Krewels net nie onwettig ingevoer het of iets nie," sê Hermien bekommerd. Hulle loer na mekaar – dit is net mooi die soort ding wat Hagrid sal doen.

"Hagrid was al tonne kere in die moeilikheid en Dompeldorius het hom nog nooit laat loop nie," sê Ron troostend. "Die ergste wat kan gebeur, is dat Hagrid van daardie Krewels ontslae sal moet raak. Jammer . . . het ek ergste gesê? Ek het beste bedoel."

Harry en Hermien lag en voel ietwat beter toe hulle vir middagete ingaan.

Daardie middag geniet Harry Dubbele Waarsêery terdeê; hulle doen nog steeds horoskope en voorspellings, maar noudat hy en Ron weer maats is, is die hele besigheid van voor af snaaks. Professor Trelawney, wat so in haar skik was toe die twee hul eie grusame sterftes voorspel het, is gou geïrriteerd toe hulle die hele tyd giggel terwyl sy die verskillende maniere waarop Pluto hul daaglikse lewe gaan omkrap vir hulle uitleë.

"Ek sou *dink*," sê sy in 'n mistiese fluisterstem wat haar ooglopende ergernis nie verbloem nie, "dat *sommige* van ons" – sy staar betekenisvol na Harry – "dalk 'n bietjie minder *ligsinnig* sal wees as hulle kon sien wat ek laas nag in die kristalbal gesien het. Terwyl ek hier in my naaldwerk verdiep was, het ek skielik 'n oorweldigende begeerte ervaar om die bal te raadpleeg . . . en wat dink julle het daaruit na my teruggekyk?"

"'n Liederlike ou vlermuis met 'n hengse bril?" brom Ron binnensmonds.

Harry moet stry teen die begeerte om te lag.

"Die *dood*, my engele."

Parvati en Hildegard slaan albei hul hande oor hul monde en lyk geskok.

"Ja," sê professor Trelawney terwyl sy swaarwigtig knik, "dit kom al nader, dit sirkel soos 'n aasvoël bo ons, al laer . . . en laer oor die kasteel . . ."

Sy staar veelbetekenend na Harry, wat aspris met 'n wyd oop mond gaap.

"Dit sou baie meer indrukwekkend gewees het as sy dit nie al omtrent tagtig keer gedoen het nie," sê Harry toe hulle uiteindelik op die trappe onder professor Trelawney se klaskamer in die vars lug staan. "As ek elke keer dat sy dit voorspel het, moes dood neerslaan, dan was ek 'n mediese wonderwerk."

“Jy sou ’n soort supergekonsentreerde spook gewees het,” sê Ron laggend terwyl hulle verby die Bloedige Baron stap wat met wydgerekte, sinistere oë in die teenoorgestelde rigting loop. “Ten minste het ons nie huiswerk gekry nie. Ek hoop Hermien kry hope by professor Vektor, ek’s mal daaroor as sy werk het en ek nie . . .”

Hermien is egter nie by aandete nie en sy is ook nie in die biblioteek toe hulle haar na ete daar gaan soek nie. Die enigste persoon wat daar is, is Viktor Krum. Ron draai ’n rukkie tussen die rakke rond terwyl hy vir Krum dophou en in ’n fluisterstem met Harry argumenteer of hy sy handtekening moet gaan vra of nie – dan besef Ron dat ’n stuk of sewe meisies in die volgende ry oor dieselfde ding stry en hy verloor belangstelling.

“Wonder waar sy is?” sê Ron toe hy en Harry na die Griffindortoring toe terugstap.

“Weet nie . . . Spekskiet.”

Die Vet Vrou het egter skaars begin oopswaai toe die geluid van klappende voetstappe agter hulle Hermien se aankoms aankondig.

“Harry!” hyg sy toe sy glyend langs hom tot stilstand kom (die Vet Vrou staar met opgetrekte wenkbroue na haar). “Harry, jy moet kom – jy moet kom, die mees ongelooflike ding het gebeur – asseblief –”

Sy gryp Harry aan die arm en probeer om hom in die gang af te sleep.

“Wat gaan aan?” vra Harry.

“Ek sal jou wys wanneer ons daar kom – o, maak net gou –”

Harry kyk om na Ron; hy kyk nuuskierig terug na Harry.

“Oukei,” sê Harry terwyl hy saam met Hermien in die gang af hardloop sodat Ron moet uithaal om hulle in te haal.

“Moet julle glad nie oor my bekommer nie!” roep die Vet Vrou geïrriteerd agterna. “Moenie verskoning vra omdat julle my gesteur het nie! Ek sal net hier hang, wyd oop, tot julle terug is, goed?”

“Ja dankie,” roep Ron oor sy skouer.

“Hermien, waarheen gaan ons?” vra Harry toe sy hulle ses verdiepings ondertoe laat hardloop en af met die marmertrappe na die Ingangsportaal toe gaan.

“Jy sal sien, jy sal nou-nou sien!” sê Hermien opgewonde.

Aan die onderpunt van die trappe draai sy links en gaan haastig na die deur waardeur Cedric Diggory gegaan het die nag nadat die Beker Vol Vuur sy en Harry se name uitgespoeg het. Harry was nog nooit tevore hier nie. Hy en Ron gaan agter Hermien met ’n stel kliptrappe af, maar pleks dat hulle in ’n somber ondergrondse tunnel beland soos die een wat na Snerp se kerker lei, bevind hulle hul in ’n breë klipgang wat helder met fakkels verlig is en met vrolike skilderye van kos versier is.

“O, wag ’n bietjie . . .” sê Harry stadig toe hulle halfpad in die gang af is. “Wag ’n bietjie, Hermien . . .”

“Wat?” Sy draai om en kyk na hom, haar gesig die ene afwagting.

“Ek weet wat hier aangaan,” sê Harry.

Hy stamp aan Ron en wys na ’n skildery net agter Hermien. Daar is ’n reuse-silwer vrugtebak op.

“Hermien!” sê Ron, wat ook begin verstaan. “Jy probeer ons al weer by daardie spoegery van jou intrek!”

“Nee, nee, glad nie!” sê sy vinnig. “En dis nie *spoeg* nie, Ron –”

“Het jy dan die naam verander?” sê Ron fronsend. “Wat noem jy dit nou? Die Huiselfbevrydingsfront? Ek gaan nie by daardie kombuis instorm en hulle probeer keer om te werk nie, ek gaan dit nie doen nie –”

“Ek vra jou ook nie om dit te doen nie!” sê Hermien ongeduldig. “Ek het nou net hierheen gekom om met hulle almal te praat en ek het – o, komaan, Harry, ek moet jou wys!”

Weer gryp sy hom aan die arm, trek hom tot voor die portret van die reusevrugtebak, steek ’n vinger uit en kielie die groot groen peer. Dit begin kriewel en giggel en verander dan skielik in ’n groot groen deurknop. Hermien gryp dit, maak die deur oop, stoot vir Harry hard in die rug en dwing hom binnetoe.

Hy kry ’n glimp van ’n enorme vertrek met ’n hoë plafon wat net so groot soos die Groot Saal reg bo hulle is. Hy sien hordes glinsterende koperpote en -panne wat in stapels teen die klipmure staan en ’n groot baksteenvuurherd aan die oorkant en toe iets kleins wat uit die middel van die vertrek gillend na hom toe aangeskarrel kom. “Harry Potter, meneer! *Harry Potter!*”

Die volgende oomblik stamp ’n skreeuende elf hom so hard in die maag dat hy winduit is, en hou hom so styf vas dat dit voel asof sy ribbes gaan breek.

“D-Dobbi?” sê Harry en snak na asem.

“Dit is Dobbi, meneer, dit is!” gil die stem van iewers by sy naeltjie. “Dobbi het gehoop en gehoop om vir Harry Potter te sien, meneer, en nou het Harry Potter vir hom kom kuier, meneer!”

Dobbi laat hom los en gee ’n paar tree agteruit terwyl hy stralend na Harry kyk met enorme groen tennisbaloë wat in trane van vreugde swem. Hy lyk amper presies soos Harry hom onthou: die potloodneus, die vlermuisore, die lang vingers en voete – alles behalwe die klere, wat nou heeltemal anders is.

Toe Dobbi vir die Malfoys gewerk het, het hy altyd dieselfde ou vuil kussingsloop gedra. Nou dra hy egter die vreemdste versameling kleedingstukke wat Harry nog ooit gesien het; hy is slegter aangetrek as die towenaars by die Wêreldbeker. Hy dra ’n teemus vir ’n hoed waarop hy ’n aantal blink wapens vasgesteek het, ’n das met perdeskoenpatrone oor ’n kaal bolyf, iets wat soos ’n kind se ou voetbalbroek lyk en onpaar sokkies. Een van hulle, sien Harry, is die swarte wat hy van sy eie voet afge-

pluk het die dag toe hy mnr. Malfoy so getart het dat hy dit vir Dobbi gegee en hom so vrygestel het. Die ander sokkie is versier met pienk en oranje strepe.

“Dobbi, wat maak jy hier?” vra Harry verbaas.

“Dobbi het by Hogwarts kom werk, meneer!” piep Dobbi opgewonde. “Professor Dompeldorius het vir Dobbi en Knipogies werk gegee, meneer!”

“Knipogies?” sê Harry. “Is sy ook hier?”

“Ja, meneer, ja!” sê Dobbi en hy gryp Harry se hand en trek hom deur die kombuis verby vier lang houttafels. Elkeen van hierdie tafels, sien Harry toe hy verbystap, staan presies onder een van die vier huistafels daar bo in die Groot Saal. Op hierdie oomblik is daar geen kos op nie, aandete is reeds verby, maar ’n uur gelede moet hulle gekreun het onder geregte wat deur die plafon na bo gestuur is.

Ten minste ’n honderd klein elfies staan stralend in die kombuis rond en buig en knieknik toe Dobbi vir Harry verby hulle lei. Hulle dra almal dieselfde uniform; ’n afdroogdoek waarop Hogwarts se wapenskild gestempel is en wat hulle, nes Knipogies, soos ’n toga om hulle gebind het.

Dobbi gaan staan voor die baksteenvuurherd en wys.

“Knipogies, meneer!” sê hy.

Knipogies sit op ’n stoel voor die vuur. Anders as Dobbi het sy haar klere duidelik nie versamel nie. Sy dra ’n netjiese rompie en bloesie met ’n bypassende blou hoed waarin gate vir haar groot ore gesny is. Waar elkeen van Dobbi se vreemde versameling kledingstukke so skoon en versorg is dat dit splinternuut lyk, gee Knipogies duidelik nie aandag aan haar klerekas nie. Daar is sopvlekke voor op haar bloes en ’n brandmerk op haar romp.

“Hallo, Knipogies,” sê Harry.

Knipogies se lip bewe. Dan bars sy in trane uit wat uit haar groot bruin oë spat en voor oor haar bors afloop net soos by die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker.

“O liewe,” sê Hermien. Sy en Ron het vir Harry en Dobbi na die ander kant van die kombuis gevolg. “Knipogies, moet asseblief nie huil nie, moenie . . .”

Knipogies huil egter nog harder as tevore. Dobbi, daarenteen, kyk stralend na Harry.

“Wil Harry Potter ’n koppie tee hê?” piep hy hard bo-oor Knipogies se snikke.

“H’m – ja, oukei,” sê Harry.

’n Stuk of ses huiselwe kom onmiddellik van agter af aangedraf met ’n groot silwer skinkbord gelaai met ’n teepot, koppies vir Harry, Ron en Hermien, ’n melkbeker en ’n yslike bord koekies.

“Dis nou vir jou diens!” sê Ron en hy klink beïndruk. Hermien frons

vir hom, maar die elwe lyk almal hoogs in hul skik; hulle buig laag en retireer.

“Hoe lank is jy al hier, Dobbi?” vra Harry terwyl Dobbi die tee uitdeel.

“Nog net ’n week, Harry Potter, meneer!” sê Dobbi in sy skik. “Dobbi het vir professor Dompeldorius kom sien, meneer. Jy sien, meneer, dit is baie moeilik vir ’n huiself wat ontslaan is om werk te kry, inderdaad baie moeilik –”

By die aanhoor van hierdie woorde huil Knipogies nog harder, haar neus wat soos ’n gedrukte tamatie lyk, drup oor haar voorkant en sy probeer glad nie om dit te keer nie.

“Dobbi het die land twee jaar lank platgereis, meneer, op soek na werk!” piep Dobbi. “Maar Dobbi kon nie werk kry nie, meneer, want Dobbi wil nou betaal word!”

Toe die huiselwe wat in die kombuis rondstaan en vol belangstelling luister hierdie woorde hoor, kyk hulle almal weg asof Dobbi iets wat ongeskik en ’n verleentheid is, gesê het.

Hermien sê egter, “Mooi so, Dobbi!”

“Dankie, juffrou!” sê Dobbi en hy grinnik met ’n mond vol tande vir haar. “Maar die meeste towenaars wil nie ’n huiself hê wat betaal wil word nie, juffrou. ‘Dis nie die punt van ’n huiself nie,’ sê hulle as hulle die deur in Dobbi se gesig toeslaan! Dobbi hou van werk, maar hy wil klere dra en betaal wees, Harry Potter . . . Dobbi hou daarvan om vry te wees!”

Hogwarts se huiselwe begin nou van Dobbi af padgee asof hy iets aansteekliks onder lede het. Knipogies bly egter net waar sy is, hoewel sy beslis harder huil.

“En toe, Harry Potter, gaan kuier Dobbi vir Knipogies en vind uit dat Knipogies ook vry geword het, meneer!” sê Dobbi opgetoë.

Met dié slinger Knipogies haarself van haar stoel af en gaan lê met haar gesig teen die grond terwyl sy met haar vuies op die geplaveide klipvloer slaan en van ellende skree. Hermien val haastig op haar knieë langs haar neer en probeer om haar te troos, maar niks wat sy sê, kan enige verskil maak nie.

Toe Dobbi met sy verhaal voortgaan, moet hy skril oor Knipogies se gehuil skree. “En toe kry Dobbi ’n plan, Harry Potter, meneer! ‘Hoekom soek Dobbi en Knipogies nie saam werk nie?’ sê Dobbi. ‘Waar is daar mis-kien genoeg werk vir twee huiselwe?’ sê Knipogies. En Dobbi dink en toe het hy dit, meneer! *Hogwarts!* En so het Dobbi en Knipogies vir professor Dompeldorius kom sien, meneer, en professor Dompeldorius het vir ons aangestel!”

Dobbi straal van oor tot oor en trane van geluk wel in sy oë op.

“En professor Dompeldorius het gesê hy sal vir Dobbi betaal, meneer, as Dobbi betaal wil wees! En nou is Dobbi ’n vry elf, meneer, en Dobbi kry elke week ’n Galjoen en een afdag elke maand!”

“Dis nie juis baie nie!” roep Hermien verontwaardig van die vloer af, bo-oor Knipogies se geskree en vuisstampery.

“Professor Dompeldorius het vir Dobbi tien Galjoene per week aangebied en elke naweek af,” sê Dobbi en sidder skielik asof die vooruitsig aan soveel vryetyd en rykdom hom laat bang word, “maar Dobbi het hom afgebring, juffrou . . . Dobbi hou van sy vryheid, juffrou, maar hy wil nie te veel hê nie, juffrou, hy hou meer van werk.”

“En hoeveel betaal professor Dompeldorius *jou*, Knipogies?” vra Hermien vriendelik.

As sy gedink het dat dit Knipogies gaan opbeur, het sy ’n groot fout gemaak. Knipogies hou wel op met huil, maar toe sy orent kom, gluur sy met haar massiewe bruin oë na Hermien en haar hele sopnat gesig is skielik vertrek van woede.

“Knipogies is ’n elf wat skande gemaak het, maar Knipogies vat nie geld nie!” piep sy. “Knipogies het nie so laag gedaal nie! Knipogies is skaam om vry te wees!”

“Skaam?” sê Hermien oorbluf. “Maar – Knipogies, komaan! Dis mnr. Crouch wat skaam moet wees, nie jy nie! Jy het niks verkeerd gedoen nie, hy was regtig aaklig met jou –”

By hierdie woorde klap Knipogies haar hande oor die gate in haar hoed, trek haar ore plat sodat sy nie ’n verdere woord kan hoor nie en skree, “Jy moenie my meester beledig nie, juffrou! Jy moenie vir mnr. Crouch beledig nie! Mnr. Crouch is ’n goeie meester, juffrou! Mnr. Crouch is reg om die stoute Knipogies te laat loop!”

“Knipogies sukkel om aan te pas, Harry Potter,” piep Dobbi vertroulik. “Knipogies vergeet dat sy nie meer aan mnr. Crouch vas is nie; sy mag nou sê wat sy dink, maar sy wil nie.”

“Mag huiselwe dan nie sê wat hulle van hul meesters dink nie?” vra Harry.

“O nee, meneer, nee,” sê Dobbi wat skielik ernstig lyk. “Dis deel van die huiself se totslaafmaking, meneer. Ons bewaar hul geheime en ons bly stil, meneer, ons hou die familie se naam hoog en ons praat nooit lelik oor hulle nie – hoewel professor Dompeldorius vir Dobbi gesê het dat hy nie hierop aandrang nie. Professor Dompeldorius het gesê ons kan enige tyd – enige tyd –”

Dobbi lyk skielik senuagtig en hy wink Harry nader. Harry buk af.

Dobbi fluister, “Hy’t gesê ons kan hom enige tyd ’n – ’n simpele ou snaar noem as ons wil, meneer!”

Dobbi uiter ’n verskrikte soort giggel.

“Maar Dobbi wil nie, Harry Potter,” sê hy in sy gewone stem terwyl hy sy kop skud tot sy ore flap. “Dobbi hou sommer baie van professor Dompeldorius, meneer, en hy is trots dat hy sy geheime vir hom kan bewaar.”

“Maar jy kan nou net wat jy wil van die Malfoys sê?” vra Harry met ’n grinnik.

’n Effens beangste trek verskyn in Dobbi se enorme oë.

“Dobbi – Dobbi kan,” sê hy twyfelend. Hy maak sy smal skouertjies reguit. “Dobbi kan vir Harry Potter sê dat sy ou meesters baie slegte – baie slegte – *Donker towenaars* is!”

Vir ’n oomblik bly Dobbi bewend staan, verskrik deur sy eie waagmoed – dan storm hy na die naaste tafel en begin om sy kop baie hard daarteen te stamp terwyl hy “*Slegte Dobbi! Slegte Dobbi!*” skree.

Harry gryp vir Dobbi aan sy das en trek hom van die tafel af weg.

“Dankie, Harry Potter, dankie,” sê Dobbi uitasem en vryf sy kop.

“Jy het net ’n bietjie oefening nodig,” sê Harry.

“Oefening!” gil Knipogies woedend. “Jy moet jou skaam, Dobbi, om so van jou meesters te praat!”

“Hulle is nie meer my meesters nie, Knipogies!” sê Dobbi uitdagend.

“Dobbi gee nie meer om wat hulle dink nie!”

“O, jy is ’n slegte elf, Dobbi!” kerm Knipogies terwyl die trane weer eens oor haar wange stroom. “My arme mnr. Crouch, wat maak hy sonder sy Knipogies? Hy het my nodig, ek moet hom help! My hele lewe lank kyk ek al na die Crouches en my ma voor my en my ouma voor haar . . . o, wat gaan hulle sê as hulle weet dat Knipogies vry is? Die skande, die skande!” Sy bêre haar gesig opnuut in haar romp en huil luidkeels.

“Knipogies,” sê Hermien ferm, “ek is seker dat mnr. Crouch heeltemal goed sonder jou regkom. Ons het hom gesien, weet jy –”

“Julle het my meester gesien?” sê Knipogies uitasem terwyl sy haar traanbevlekte gesig uit haar romp lig en met groot oë na Hermien staar. “Jy’t hom hier by Hogwarts gesien?”

“Ja,” sê Hermien. “Hy en mnr. Bagman is beoordelaars by die Drietoewenaarstoernooi.”

“Mnr. Bagman kom ook?” piep Knipogies en tot Harry se groot verbasing (so ook Ron en Hermien s’n, te oordeel na die uitdrukking op hul gesigte) lyk sy van voor af kwaad. “Mnr. Bagman is ’n slegte toenaar! ’n Baie slegte toenaar! My meester hou nie van hom nie, o, nee, glad nie!”

“Bagman – sleg?” sê Harry.

“O, ja,” sê Knipogies en sy knik haar kop woedend. “My meester het vir Knipogies ’n paar dinge vertel! Maar Knipogies sê nie . . . Knipogies – Knipogies bewaar haar meester se geheime . . .”

Sy bars weer eens in trane uit; hulle hoor hoe sy in haar romp snik, “Arme meester, arme meester, g’n niks meer Knipogies om hom te help nie!”

Hulle kan nie nog ’n sinvolle woord uit Knipogies kry nie. Hulle laat haar alleen om klaar te huil terwyl hulle hul tee drink en Dobbi opgewonde oor sy lewe as ’n vry elf babbel en oor wat hy alles met sy loon gaan doen.

“Dobbi gaan een van die dae vir hom ’n trui koop!” sê hy tevrede en wys na sy kaal bors.

“Ek sê jou wat, Dobbi,” sê Ron, wat skynbaar baie van die elf begin hou het, “ek gee vir jou die een wat my ma hierdie Kersfees vir my gebrei het, ek kry altyd een by haar. Jy gee seker nie om vir maroen nie, of hoe?”

Dobbi is verheug.

“Ons sal dit dalk ’n bietjie moet krimp om vir jou te pas,” sê Ron vir hom, “maar dit sal mooi lyk by jou teemus.”

Toe hulle gereed maak om te gaan, kom ’n klomp van die elwe nader en bied hulle lekkernye aan om boontoe te neem. Hermien weier en lyk gepynig oor die manier waarop die elwe buig en knieknik, maar Harry en Ron laai hul sakke vol roomkoekies en pasteitjies.

“Baie dankie, hoor!” sê Harry vir die elwe wat om die deur saamdrom om nag te sê. “Sien jou weer, Dobbi!”

“Harry Potter . . . kan Dobbi partykeer vir jou kom kuier?” vra Dobbi huiwerig.

“Natuurlik kan jy,” sê Harry en Dobbi straal.

“Weet julle wat?” sê Ron toe hy, Hermien en Harry die kombuis verlaat het en die trappe na die Ingangsportaal uitklim. “Ek is nog al hierdie jare so beïndruk met Fred en George wat kos in die kombuis gaan steel – wel, dis regtig nie moeilik nie, is dit? Hulle kan nie wag om dit weg te gee nie!”

“Ek dink dis die beste ding wat met daardie elwe kon gebeur het, weet julle,” sê Hermien toe sy voor hulle met die trappe uitloop. “Ek bedoel, met Dobbi wat hier kom werk het en alles. Die ander elwe sal sien hoe gelukkig hy is noudat hy vry is en dit sal stadigaan tot hulle deuring dat hulle ook so wil wees!”

“Kom ons hoop hulle kyk nie te goed na Knipogies nie,” sê Harry.

“O, sy sal opkikker,” sê Hermien hoewel sy ietwat onseker klink. “As sy eers oor die skok is en aan Hogwarts gewoonnd geraak het, sal sy sien dat sy beter daaraan toe is sonder daardie Crouch.”

“Dit lyk asof sy vir hom omgee,” mompel Ron binnensmonds (hy het so pas ’n roomkoekie begin eet).

“Lyk nie asof sy te veel van Bagman dink nie, nè?” sê Harry. “Wonder wat Crouch alles by die huis oor hom sê.”

“Seker dat hy nie ’n goeie hoof van sy departement is nie,” sê Hermien, “en om eerlik te wees . . . daar steek iets in.”

“Ek sal nog steeds eerder vir hom as vir ou Crouch werk,” sê Ron. “Bagman het ten minste ’n sin vir humor.”

“Moenie dat Percy jou hoor nie,” sê Hermien en sy glimlag so effens.

“Ja, wel, Percy sal nie vir iemand met ’n sin vir humor wil werk nie, sal hy?” sê Ron wat nou ’n sjokolade-éclair eet. “Percy sal nie ’n grap herken as dit kaal met Dobbi se teemus op voor hom dans nie.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



THE UNEXPECTED TASK

Potter! Weasley! *Will you pay attention?*”

Professor McGonagall’s irritated voice cracked like a whip through the Transfiguration class on Thursday, and Harry and Ron both jumped and looked up.

It was the end of the lesson; they had finished their work; the guinea fowl they had been changing into guinea pigs had been shut away in a large cage on Professor McGonagall’s desk (Neville’s still had feathers); they had copied down their homework from the blackboard (“*Describe, with examples, the ways in which Transforming Spells must be adapted when performing Cross-Species Switches*”). The bell was due to ring at any moment, and Harry and Ron, who had been having a sword fight with a couple of

Fred and George's fake wands at the back of the class, looked up, Ron holding a tin parrot and Harry, a rubber haddock.

"Now that Potter and Weasley have been kind enough to act their age," said Professor McGonagall, with an angry look at the pair of them as the head of Harry's haddock drooped and fell silently to the floor — Ron's parrot's beak had severed it moments before — "I have something to say to you all.

"The Yule Ball is approaching — a traditional part of the Triwizard Tournament and an opportunity for us to socialize with our foreign guests. Now, the ball will be open only to fourth years and above — although you may invite a younger student if you wish —"

Lavender Brown let out a shrill giggle. Parvati Patil nudged her hard in the ribs, her face working furiously as she too fought not to giggle. They both looked around at Harry. Professor McGonagall ignored them, which Harry thought was distinctly unfair, as she had just told off him and Ron.

"Dress robes will be worn," Professor McGonagall continued, "and the ball will start at eight o'clock on Christmas Day, finishing at midnight in the Great Hall. Now then —"

Professor McGonagall stared deliberately around the class.

"The Yule Ball is of course a chance for us all to — er — let our hair down," she said, in a disapproving voice.

Lavender giggled harder than ever, with her hand pressed hard against her mouth to stifle the sound. Harry could see what was funny this time: Professor McGonagall, with her hair in a tight bun, looked as though she had never let her hair down in any sense.

"But that does NOT mean," Professor McGonagall went on, "that

we will be relaxing the standards of behavior we expect from Hogwarts students. I will be most seriously displeased if a Gryffindor student embarrasses the school in any way.”

The bell rang, and there was the usual scuffle of activity as everyone packed their bags and swung them onto their shoulders.

Professor McGonagall called above the noise, “Potter — a word, if you please.”

Assuming this had something to do with his headless rubber haddock, Harry proceeded gloomily to the teacher’s desk. Professor McGonagall waited until the rest of the class had gone, and then said, “Potter, the champions and their partners —”

“What partners?” said Harry.

Professor McGonagall looked suspiciously at him, as though she thought he was trying to be funny.

“Your partners for the Yule Ball, Potter,” she said coldly. “Your *dance partners*.”

Harry’s insides seemed to curl up and shrivel.

“Dance partners?” He felt himself going red. “I don’t dance,” he said quickly.

“Oh yes, you do,” said Professor McGonagall irritably. “That’s what I’m telling you. Traditionally, the champions and their partners open the ball.”

Harry had a sudden mental image of himself in a top hat and tails, accompanied by a girl in the sort of frilly dress Aunt Petunia always wore to Uncle Vernon’s work parties.

“I’m not dancing,” he said.

“It is traditional,” said Professor McGonagall firmly. “You are a

Hogwarts champion, and you will do what is expected of you as a representative of the school. So make sure you get yourself a partner, Potter.”

“But — I don’t —”

“You heard me, Potter,” said Professor McGonagall in a very final sort of way.

A week ago, Harry would have said finding a partner for a dance would be a cinch compared to taking on a Hungarian Horntail. But now that he had done the latter, and was facing the prospect of asking a girl to the ball, he thought he’d rather have another round with the dragon.

Harry had never known so many people to put their names down to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas; he always did, of course, because the alternative was usually going back to Privet Drive, but he had always been very much in the minority before now. This year, however, everyone in the fourth year and above seemed to be staying, and they all seemed to Harry to be obsessed with the coming ball — or at least all the girls were, and it was amazing how many girls Hogwarts suddenly seemed to hold; he had never quite noticed that before. Girls giggling and whispering in the corridors, girls shrieking with laughter as boys passed them, girls excitedly comparing notes on what they were going to wear on Christmas night. . . .

“Why do they have to move in packs?” Harry asked Ron as a dozen or so girls walked past them, sniggering and staring at Harry. “How’re you supposed to get one on their own to ask them?”

“Lasso one?” Ron suggested. “Got any idea who you’re going to

try?”

Harry didn't answer. He knew perfectly well whom he'd *like* to ask, but working up the nerve was something else. . . . Cho was a year older than he was; she was very pretty; she was a very good Quidditch player, and she was also very popular.

Ron seemed to know what was going on inside Harry's head.

“Listen, you're not going to have any trouble. You're a champion. You've just beaten a Hungarian Horntail. I bet they'll be queuing up to go with you.”

In tribute to their recently repaired friendship, Ron had kept the bitterness in his voice to a bare minimum. Moreover, to Harry's amazement, he turned out to be quite right.

A curly-haired third-year Hufflepuff girl to whom Harry had never spoken in his life asked him to go to the ball with her the very next day. Harry was so taken aback he said no before he'd even stopped to consider the matter. The girl walked off looking rather hurt, and Harry had to endure Dean's, Seamus's, and Ron's taunts about her all through History of Magic. The following day, two more girls asked him, a second year and (to his horror) a fifth year who looked as though she might knock him out if he refused.

“She was quite good-looking,” said Ron fairly, after he'd stopped laughing.

“She was a foot taller than me,” said Harry, still unnerved. “Imagine what I'd look like trying to dance with her.”

Hermione's words about Krum kept coming back to him. “They only like him because he's famous!” Harry doubted very much if any of the girls who had asked to be his partner so far would have

wanted to go to the ball with him if he hadn't been a school champion. Then he wondered if this would bother him if Cho asked him.

On the whole, Harry had to admit that even with the embarrassing prospect of opening the ball before him, life had definitely improved since he had got through the first task. He wasn't attracting nearly as much unpleasantness in the corridors anymore, which he suspected had a lot to do with Cedric — he had an idea Cedric might have told the Hufflepuffs to leave Harry alone, in gratitude for Harry's tip-off about the dragons. There seemed to be fewer *Support Cedric Diggory!* badges around too. Draco Malfoy, of course, was still quoting Rita Skeeter's article to him at every possible opportunity, but he was getting fewer and fewer laughs out of it — and just to heighten Harry's feeling of well-being, no story about Hagrid had appeared in the *Daily Prophet*.

"She didn' seem very int'rested in magical creatures, ter tell yeh the truth," Hagrid said, when Harry, Ron, and Hermione asked him how his interview with Rita Skeeter had gone during the last Care of Magical Creatures lesson of the term. To their very great relief, Hagrid had given up on direct contact with the skrewts now, and they were merely sheltering behind his cabin today, sitting at a trestle table and preparing a fresh selection of food with which to tempt the skrewts.

"She jus' wanted me ter talk about you, Harry," Hagrid continued in a low voice. "Well, I told her we'd been friends since I went ter fetch yeh from the Dursleys. 'Never had to tell him off in four years?' she said. 'Never played you up in lessons, has he?' I told her no, an'

she didn't seem happy at all. Yeh'd think she wanted me to say yeh were horrible, Harry."

"Course she did," said Harry, throwing lumps of dragon liver into a large metal bowl and picking up his knife to cut some more. "She can't keep writing about what a tragic little hero I am, it'll get boring."

"She wants a new angle, Hagrid," said Ron wisely as he shelled salamander eggs. "You were supposed to say Harry's a mad delinquent!"

"But he's not!" said Hagrid, looking genuinely shocked.

"She should've interviewed Snape," said Harry grimly. "He'd give her the goods on me any day. *'Potter has been crossing lines ever since he first arrived at this school. . . .'*"

"Said that, did he?" said Hagrid, while Ron and Hermione laughed. "Well, yeh might've bent a few rules, Harry, bu' yeh're all righ' really, aren' you?"

"Cheers, Hagrid," said Harry, grinning.

"You coming to this ball thing on Christmas Day, Hagrid?" said Ron.

"Though' I might look in on it, yeah," said Hagrid gruffly. "Should be a good do, I reckon. You'll be openin' the dancin', won' yeh, Harry? Who're you takin'?"

"No one, yet," said Harry, feeling himself going red again. Hagrid didn't pursue the subject.

The last week of term became increasingly boisterous as it progressed. Rumors about the Yule Ball were flying everywhere, though Harry didn't believe half of them — for instance, that

Dumbledore had bought eight hundred barrels of mulled mead from Madam Rosmerta. It seemed to be fact, however, that he had booked the Weird Sisters. Exactly who or what the Weird Sisters were Harry didn't know, never having had access to a wizard's wireless, but he deduced from the wild excitement of those who had grown up listening to the WWN (Wizarding Wireless Network) that they were a very famous musical group.

Some of the teachers, like little Professor Flitwick, gave up trying to teach them much when their minds were so clearly elsewhere; he allowed them to play games in his lesson on Wednesday, and spent most of it talking to Harry about the perfect Summoning Charm Harry had used during the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. Other teachers were not so generous. Nothing would ever deflect Professor Binns, for example, from plowing on through his notes on goblin rebellions — as Binns hadn't let his own death stand in the way of continuing to teach, they supposed a small thing like Christmas wasn't going to put him off. It was amazing how he could make even bloody and vicious goblin riots sound as boring as Percy's cauldron-bottom report. Professors McGonagall and Moody kept them working until the very last second of their classes too, and Snape, of course, would no sooner let them play games in class than adopt Harry. Staring nastily around at them all, he informed them that he would be testing them on poison antidotes during the last lesson of the term.

"Evil, he is," Ron said bitterly that night in the Gryffindor common room. "Springing a test on us on the last day. Ruining the last bit of term with a whole load of studying."

"Mmm . . . you're not exactly straining yourself, though, are you?"

said Hermione, looking at him over the top of her Potions notes. Ron was busy building a card castle out of his Exploding Snap pack — a much more interesting pastime than with Muggle cards, because of the chance that the whole thing would blow up at any second.

“It’s Christmas, Hermione,” said Harry lazily; he was rereading *Flying with the Cannons* for the tenth time in an armchair near the fire.

Hermione looked severely over at him too. “I’d have thought you’d be doing something constructive, Harry, even if you don’t want to learn your antidotes!”

“Like what?” Harry said as he watched Joey Jenkins of the Cannons belt a Bludger toward a Ballycastle Bats Chaser.

“That egg!” Hermione hissed.

“Come on, Hermione, I’ve got till February the twenty-fourth,” Harry said.

He had put the golden egg upstairs in his trunk and hadn’t opened it since the celebration party after the first task. There were still two and a half months to go until he needed to know what all the screechy wailing meant, after all.

“But it might take weeks to work it out!” said Hermione. “You’re going to look a real idiot if everyone else knows what the next task is and you don’t!”

“Leave him alone, Hermione, he’s earned a bit of a break,” said Ron, and he placed the last two cards on top of the castle and the whole lot blew up, singeing his eyebrows.

“Nice look, Ron . . . go well with your dress robes, that will.”

It was Fred and George. They sat down at the table with Harry,

Ron, and Hermione as Ron felt how much damage had been done.

“Ron, can we borrow Pigwidgeon?” George asked.

“No, he’s off delivering a letter,” said Ron. “Why?”

“Because George wants to invite him to the ball,” said Fred sarcastically.

“Because *we* want to send a letter, you stupid great prat,” said George.

“Who d’you two keep writing to, eh?” said Ron.

“Nose out, Ron, or I’ll burn that for you too,” said Fred, waving his wand threateningly. “So . . . you lot got dates for the ball yet?”

“Nope,” said Ron.

“Well, you’d better hurry up, mate, or all the good ones will be gone,” said Fred.

“Who’re you going with, then?” said Ron.

“Angelina,” said Fred promptly, without a trace of embarrassment.

“What?” said Ron, taken aback. “You’ve already asked her?”

“Good point,” said Fred. He turned his head and called across the common room, “Oi! Angelina!”

Angelina, who had been chatting with Alicia Spinnet near the fire, looked over at him.

“What?” she called back.

“Want to come to the ball with me?”

Angelina gave Fred an appraising sort of look.

“All right, then,” she said, and she turned back to Alicia and carried on chatting with a bit of a grin on her face.

“There you go,” said Fred to Harry and Ron, “piece of cake.”

He got to his feet, yawning, and said, “We’d better use a school owl then, George, come on. . . .”

They left. Ron stopped feeling his eyebrows and looked across the smoldering wreck of his card castle at Harry.

“We *should* get a move on, you know . . . ask someone. He’s right. We don’t want to end up with a pair of trolls.”

Hermione let out a sputter of indignation.

“A pair of . . . *what*, excuse me?”

“Well — you know,” said Ron, shrugging. “I’d rather go alone than with — with Eloise Midgen, say.”

“Her acne’s loads better lately — and she’s really nice!”

“Her nose is off-center,” said Ron.

“Oh I see,” Hermione said, bristling. “So basically, you’re going to take the best-looking girl who’ll have you, even if she’s completely horrible?”

“Er — yeah, that sounds about right,” said Ron.

“I’m going to bed,” Hermione snapped, and she swept off toward the girls’ staircase without another word.

The Hogwarts staff, demonstrating a continued desire to impress the visitors from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, seemed determined to show the castle at its best this Christmas. When the decorations went up, Harry noticed that they were the most stunning he had yet seen inside the school. Everlasting icicles had been attached to the banisters of the marble staircase; the usual twelve Christmas trees in the Great Hall were bedecked with everything from luminous holly berries to real, hooting, golden owls, and the suits of armor had all

been bewitched to sing carols whenever anyone passed them. It was quite something to hear “O Come, All Ye Faithful” sung by an empty helmet that only knew half the words. Several times, Filch the caretaker had to extract Peeves from inside the armor, where he had taken to hiding, filling in the gaps in the songs with lyrics of his own invention, all of which were very rude.

And still, Harry hadn’t asked Cho to the ball. He and Ron were getting very nervous now, though as Harry pointed out, Ron would look much less stupid than he would without a partner; Harry was supposed to be starting the dancing with the other champions.

“I suppose there’s always Moaning Myrtle,” he said gloomily, referring to the ghost who haunted the girls’ toilets on the second floor.

“Harry — we’ve just got to grit our teeth and do it,” said Ron on Friday morning, in a tone that suggested they were planning the storming of an impregnable fortress. “When we get back to the common room tonight, we’ll both have partners — agreed?”

“Er . . . okay,” said Harry.

But every time he glimpsed Cho that day — during break, and then lunchtime, and once on the way to History of Magic — she was surrounded by friends. Didn’t she *ever* go anywhere alone? Could he perhaps ambush her as she was going into a bathroom? But no — she even seemed to go there with an escort of four or five girls. Yet if he didn’t do it soon, she was bound to have been asked by somebody else.

He found it hard to concentrate on Snape’s Potions test, and consequently forgot to add the key ingredient — a bezoar — meaning

that he received bottom marks. He didn't care, though; he was too busy screwing up his courage for what he was about to do. When the bell rang, he grabbed his bag, and hurried to the dungeon door.

"I'll meet you at dinner," he said to Ron and Hermione, and he dashed off upstairs.

He'd just have to ask Cho for a private word, that was all. . . . He hurried off through the packed corridors looking for her, and (rather sooner than he had expected) he found her, emerging from a Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson.

"Er — Cho? Could I have a word with you?"

Giggling should be made illegal, Harry thought furiously, as all the girls around Cho started doing it. She didn't, though. She said, "Okay," and followed him out of earshot of her classmates.

Harry turned to look at her and his stomach gave a weird lurch as though he had missed a step going downstairs.

"Er," he said.

He couldn't ask her. He couldn't. But he had to. Cho stood there looking puzzled, watching him.

The words came out before Harry had quite got his tongue around them.

"Wangoballwime?"

"Sorry?" said Cho.

"D'you — d'you want to go to the ball with me?" said Harry. Why did he have to go red now? *Why?*

"Oh!" said Cho, and she went red too. "Oh Harry, I'm really sorry," and she truly looked it. "I've already said I'll go with someone else."

“Oh,” said Harry.

It was odd; a moment before his insides had been writhing like snakes, but suddenly he didn’t seem to have any insides at all.

“Oh okay,” he said, “no problem.”

“I’m really sorry,” she said again.

“That’s okay,” said Harry.

They stood there looking at each other, and then Cho said, “Well —”

“Yeah,” said Harry.

“Well, ’bye,” said Cho, still very red. She walked away.

Harry called after her, before he could stop himself.

“Who’re you going with?”

“Oh — Cedric,” she said. “Cedric Diggory.”

“Oh right,” said Harry.

His insides had come back again. It felt as though they had been filled with lead in their absence.

Completely forgetting about dinner, he walked slowly back up to Gryffindor Tower, Cho’s voice echoing in his ears with every step he took. “*Cedric — Cedric Diggory.*” He had been starting to quite like Cedric — prepared to overlook the fact that he had once beaten him at Quidditch, and was handsome, and popular, and nearly everyone’s favorite champion. Now he suddenly realized that Cedric was in fact a useless pretty boy who didn’t have enough brains to fill an eggcup.

“Fairy lights,” he said dully to the Fat Lady — the password had been changed the previous day.

“Yes, indeed, dear!” she trilled, straightening her new tinsel hair

band as she swung forward to admit him.

Entering the common room, Harry looked around, and to his surprise he saw Ron sitting ashen-faced in a distant corner. Ginny was sitting with him, talking to him in what seemed to be a low, soothing voice.

“What’s up, Ron?” said Harry, joining them.

Ron looked up at Harry, a sort of blind horror in his face.

“Why did I do it?” he said wildly. “I don’t know what made me do it!”

“What?” said Harry.

“He — er — just asked Fleur Delacour to go to the ball with him,” said Ginny. She looked as though she was fighting back a smile, but she kept patting Ron’s arm sympathetically.

“You *what*?” said Harry.

“I don’t know what made me do it!” Ron gasped again. “What was I playing at? There were people — all around — I’ve gone mad — everyone watching! I was just walking past her in the entrance hall — she was standing there talking to Diggory — and it sort of came over me — and I asked her!”

Ron moaned and put his face in his hands. He kept talking, though the words were barely distinguishable.

“She looked at me like I was a sea slug or something. Didn’t even answer. And then — I dunno — I just sort of came to my senses and ran for it.”

“She’s part veela,” said Harry. “You were right — her grandmother was one. It wasn’t your fault, I bet you just walked past when she was turning on the old charm for Diggory and got a blast of

it — but she was wasting her time. He's going with Cho Chang."

Ron looked up.

"I asked her to go with me just now," Harry said dully, "and she told me."

Ginny had suddenly stopped smiling.

"This is mad," said Ron. "We're the only ones left who haven't got anyone — well, except Neville. Hey — guess who he asked? *Hermione!*"

"*What?*" said Harry, completely distracted by this startling news.

"Yeah, I know!" said Ron, some of the color coming back into his face as he started to laugh. "He told me after Potions! Said she's always been really nice, helping him out with work and stuff — but she told him she was already going with someone. Ha! As if! She just didn't want to go with Neville . . . I mean, who would?"

"Don't!" said Ginny, annoyed. "Don't laugh —"

Just then Hermione climbed in through the portrait hole.

"Why weren't you two at dinner?" she said, coming over to join them.

"Because — oh shut up laughing, you two — because they've both just been turned down by girls they asked to the ball!" said Ginny.

That shut Harry and Ron up.

"Thanks a bunch, Ginny," said Ron sourly.

"All the good-looking ones taken, Ron?" said Hermione loftily. "Eloise Midgen starting to look quite pretty now, is she? Well, I'm sure you'll find someone *somewhere* who'll have you."

But Ron was staring at Hermione as though suddenly seeing her in

a whole new light.

“Hermione, Neville’s right — you *are* a girl. . . .”

“Oh well spotted,” she said acidly.

“Well — you can come with one of us!”

“No, I can’t,” snapped Hermione.

“Oh come on,” he said impatiently, “we need partners, we’re going to look really stupid if we haven’t got any, everyone else has . . .”

“I can’t come with you,” said Hermione, now blushing, “because I’m already going with someone.”

“No, you’re not!” said Ron. “You just said that to get rid of Neville!”

“Oh *did* I?” said Hermione, and her eyes flashed dangerously. “Just because it’s taken *you* three years to notice, Ron, doesn’t mean no one *else* has spotted I’m a girl!”

Ron stared at her. Then he grinned again.

“Okay, okay, we know you’re a girl,” he said. “That do? Will you come now?”

“I’ve already told you!” Hermione said very angrily. “I’m going with someone else!”

And she stormed off toward the girls’ dormitories again.

“She’s lying,” said Ron flatly, watching her go.

“She’s not,” said Ginny quietly.

“Who is it then?” said Ron sharply.

“I’m not telling you, it’s her business,” said Ginny.

“Right,” said Ron, who looked extremely put out, “this is getting

stupid. Ginny, *you* can go with Harry, and I'll just —"

"I can't," said Ginny, and she went scarlet too. "I'm going with — with Neville. He asked me when Hermione said no, and I thought . . . well . . . I'm not going to be able to go otherwise, I'm not in fourth year." She looked extremely miserable. "I think I'll go and have dinner," she said, and she got up and walked off to the portrait hole, her head bowed.

Ron goggled at Harry.

"What's got into them?" he demanded.

But Harry had just seen Parvati and Lavender come in through the portrait hole. The time had come for drastic action.

"Wait here," he said to Ron, and he stood up, walked straight up to Parvati, and said, "Parvati? Will you go to the ball with me?"

Parvati went into a fit of giggles. Harry waited for them to subside, his fingers crossed in the pocket of his robes.

"Yes, all right then," she said finally, blushing furiously.

"Thanks," said Harry, in relief. "Lavender — will you go with Ron?"

"She's going with Seamus," said Parvati, and the pair of them giggled harder than ever.

Harry sighed.

"Can't you think of anyone who'd go with Ron?" he said, lowering his voice so that Ron wouldn't hear.

"What about Hermione Granger?" said Parvati.

"She's going with someone else."

Parvati looked astonished.

“Ooooh — *who?*” she said keenly.

Harry shrugged. “No idea,” he said. “So what about Ron?”

“Well . . .” said Parvati slowly, “I suppose my sister might . . .

Padma, you know . . . in Ravenclaw. I’ll ask her if you like.”

“Yeah, that would be great,” said Harry. “Let me know, will you?”

And he went back over to Ron, feeling that this ball was a lot more trouble than it was worth, and hoping very much that Padma Patil’s nose was dead center.

Die Onverwagte Taak

“Potter! Weasley! Sal julle aandag gee!”

Daardie Donderdag klap professor McGonagall se geïrriteerde stem soos 'n sweep deur die Transfigurasie-klas sodat Harry en Ron wip en opkyk.

Dit is die einde van die les; hulle is klaar met hul werk; die tarentale wat hulle in marmotjies moes verander, is in 'n groot krat op professor McGonagall se lessenaar toegemaak (Neville se marmotjie het nog steeds vere) en hulle het hul huiswerk van die bord afgeskryf (“Beskryf en gee voorbeelde van die maniere waarop Transformerende Towerspreuke aangepas moet word wanneer Interspesie-ruilings gedoen word”). Die klok moet enige oomblik lui en toe Harry en Ron, wat 'n swaardgeveg gehou het met twee van Fred en George se kultowerstawwe, opkyk, hou Ron 'n blikpapegaai en Harry 'n rubberskelvis vas.

“Noudat Potter en Weasley vriendelik genoeg was om vir almal te wys presies hoe kinderagtig hulle is,” sê professor McGonagall wat ergerlik na die tweestuks kyk op die oomblik dat Harry se skelvis se kop kantel en afval – Ron se papegaai se snawel het dit oomblikke tevore raak gekap – “het ek iets om vir julle te sê.

“Die Kersbal kom nader – dis 'n tradisionele deel van die Drietownaarstoernooi en 'n geleentheid vir ons om gesellig saam met ons buitelandse gaste te verkeer. Die bal is net oop vir vierdejaars en ouer – hoewel julle 'n jonger student mag nooi as julle wil –”

Hildegard Braun los 'n klein gillettjie. Parvati Patel stamp haar hard in die ribbes, haar gesig werk verwoed soos sy probeer om nie te giggel nie. Hulle kyk albei om na Harry. Professor McGonagall ignoreer hulle, wat, so dink Harry, beslis onregverdig is siende dat sy so pas met hom en Ron geraas het.

“Julle moet 'n aandkleed dra,” gaan professor McGonagall voort, “die bal begin om agtuur op Kersaand in die Groot Saal en sal teen midder-nag klaarmaak. Nou luister mooi –”

Professor McGonagall staar om die beurt na elkeen van hulle.

“Die Kersbal bied natuurlik 'n ideale geleentheid aan ons almal om 'n bietjie – h'm – uitgelate te wees,” sê sy in 'n afkeurende stem.

Nou giggel Hildegard nog harder as tevore. Sy hou haar hand voor haar mond om die geluid te onderdruk. Hierdie keer kan Harry verstaan wat so snaaks is: professor McGonagall dra haar hare in 'n stywe bolla en lyk glad nie soos iemand wat kan laat waai nie.

“Dit beteken egter NIE,” gaan professor McGonagall voort, “dat ons die standaarde van gedrag wat ons van Hogwarts se studente verwag, sal verslap nie. Ek sal bitter omgekrap wees as 'n Griffindor-student die skool op enige manier in die skande steek.”

Die klok lui en daar is die gewone geskuifel soos almal hul sakke inpak en oor hul skouers swaai.

Professor McGonagall roep oor die geraas, “Potter – 'n oomblik, asseblief.”

Harry neem aan dat dit iets met sy koplose rubberskelvis te doen het en gaan sleepvoet na die onderwyser se lessenaar toe.

Professor McGonagall wag tot die res van die klas uit is en toe sê sy, “Potter, die kampioene en hul metgeselle –”

“Watter metgeselle?” sê Harry.

Professor McGonagall kyk agterdogtig na hom asof sy dink hy probeer snaaks wees.

“Jul metgeselle vir die Kersbal, Potter,” sê sy kil. “Jul *dansmaats*.”

Dis of Harry se binnegoed opkrul en wegkrimp. “Dansmaats?”

Hy voel hoe hy rooi word. “Ek dans nie,” sê hy vinnig.

“O ja, jy dans,” sê professor McGonagall geïrriteerd. “Dis wat ek vir jou wil sê. Volgens tradisie open die kampioene en hul metgeselle die dansbaan.”

Voor sy geestesooë sien Harry homself skielik in 'n swartbolkeil en 'n swaelstert saam met 'n meisie in die soort valletjiesrok wat tant Petunia altyd na oom Vernon se werkspartytjies dra.

“Ek gaan nie dans nie,” sê hy.

“Dis tradisie,” sê professor McGonagall beslis. “Jy is 'n Hogwarts-kampioen en as verteenwoordiger van die skool sal jy doen wat van jou verwag word. Maak dus seker dat jy 'n metgesel het, Potter.”

“Maar – ek het nie –”

“Jy het gehoor wat ek gesê het, Potter,” sê professor McGonagall baie beslis.

'n Week gelede sou Harry gereken het dat dit baie makliker sal wees om 'n metgesel vir 'n dans te vra as om teen 'n Hongaarse Horingstert te moet kragte meet. Noudat hy laasgenoemde egter gedoen het en 'n meisie vir die bal moet vra, voel hy dat hy veel eerder weer teen die Horingstert te staan sal wil kom.

Nog nooit tevore het Harry soveel mense hul name sien opgee om oor Kersfees by Hogwarts te bly nie; hy bly natuurlik altyd, want die alter-

natief is Ligusterlaan, maar hy was nog altyd een van 'n klein minderheid. Vanjaar lyk dit asof almal in hul vierde jaar en hoër gaan bly, en dit lyk vir Harry asof almal met die komende bal behep is – ten minste, al die meisies is en dit is verstommend om te sien hoeveel meisies daar skielik in Hogwarts is; hy het dit nog nooit tevore opgelet nie. Meisies giggel en fluister in die gange, meisies skree van die lag as die seuns verby hulle stap, meisies staan opgewonde en gesels oor wat hulle Kersaand gaan aantrek . . .

“Hoekom beweeg hulle altyd in groepe?” vra Harry vir Ron toe 'n stuk of twaalf meisies giggelend verbystap en na Harry staar. “Hoe moet 'n mens miskien een van hulle op haar eie kry om haar te vra?”

“Met 'n tou vang?” stel Ron voor. “Het jy 'n idee wie jy gaan vra?”

Harry antwoord nie. Hy weet heeltemal goed wie hy wil vra, maar dis nie so maklik om die nodige moed bymekaar te skraap nie . . . Cho is 'n jaar ouer as hy, sy is baie mooi, sy is 'n baie goeie Kwiddiekspeeler en sy is ook baie gewild.

Dit lyk asof Ron weet wat in Harry se kop aangaan.

“Luister, jy sal geen probleme hê nie. Jy's 'n kampioen. Jy het so pas 'n Hongaarse Horingstert geklop. Ek wed hulle sal toustaan om saam met jou te kan gaan.”

Ter wille van hul pas herstelde vriendskap beperk Ron die bitterheid in sy stem tot 'n volstreekte minimum. Wat meer is, hy is, tot Harry se verbasing, heeltemal reg.

'n Derdejaar-Hoesenproesmeisie met krullerige hare en met wie Harry nog nooit in sy lewe gepraat het nie, vra hom net die volgende dag om saam met haar bal toe te gaan. Harry is so uit die veld geslaan dat hy “nee” sê voor hy mooi daaroor kon nadink. Die meisie lyk nogal afgehaal toe sy wegstap en tydens die Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns-les moet Harry Dean, Septimus en Ron se geterg oor haar verduur. Die volgende dag vra nog twee meisies hom, 'n tweedejaar en (tot sy ontnugtering) 'n vyfdejaar wat lyk asof sy hom sal uitslaan indien hy sou weier.

“Sy is nogal half mooierig,” sê Ron in alle regverdigheid toe hy ophou lag het.

“Sy's 'n kop langer as ek,” sê Harry wat nog steeds ontsenu is. “Dink net hoe ek sal lyk as ek met haar moet dans.”

Hermien se woorde oor Krum bly by hom spook. “*Hulle hou net van hom omdat hy beroemd is!*” Harry twyfel sterk of enige van die meisies wat hom tot dusver gevra het om hul metgesel te wees saam met hom na die bal sou wou gaan as hy nie die skool se kampioen was nie. Dan wonder hy of dit hom sou pla as dit Cho was wat hom gevra het.

In die geheel gesien, moet Harry erken dat ten spyte van die verskriklike vooruitsig van die bal wat hy moet open, die lewe beslis verbeter het sedert die eerste taak afgehandel is. Daar is nie naastebly soveel onaan-

genaamheid in die gange soos tevore nie en hy vermoed dat Cedric iets hiermee te doen het – hy het ’n idee dat Cedric, uit dankbaarheid vir Harry se wenk oor die drake, vir die Hoesenproesers gesê het om vir Harry uit te los. Dit lyk ook asof daar minder *Ondersteun CEDRIC DIGGORY*-wapens is. Draco Malfoy haal natuurlik nog gereeld uit Rika Skinner se artikel aan, maar al minder mense lag daarvoor – en, om Harry se gevoel van behae te verhoog, verskyn daar ook geen artikel oor Hagrid in die *Daaglikse Profeet* nie.

“Sy was nie alte geïnteresseerd in magiese kreature nie, as ek nou die waarheid moet sê,” sê Hagrid toe Harry, Ron en Hermien hom tydens hul laaste Versorging van Magiese Kreature-les oor die onderhoud met Rika Skinner uitvra. Tot hul verligting het Hagrid besluit dat daar nie meer direkte kontak met die Krewels sal wees nie, dus sit hulle vandag bloot verskuil agter sy hut by ’n opslaantafel en berei ’n vars verskeidenheid kossoorte voor om die Krewels mee te verlei.

“Sy wou net dat ek oor jou praat, Harry,” gaan Hagrid in ’n gedempte stem voort. “Wel, ek het vir haar gesê dat ons al vriende is van die dag dat ek jou by die Dursleys gaan haal het. ‘Nog nooit in die laaste vier jaar nodig gehad om met hom te raas nie?’ het sy gesê. ‘Jou nog nooit in die klas kwaad gemaak nie?’ Ek het vir haar nee gesê en daaroor het sy glad nie gelukkig gelyk nie. ’n Mens sou dink sy wil hê ek moet sê hoe aaklig jy is, Harry.”

“Natuurlik wil sy,” sê Harry terwyl hy hompe draaklewer in ’n groot metaalbak gooi en sy mes optel om nog af te sny. “Sy kan nie net wil skryf oor watter tragiese heldjie ek is nie, dit raak vervelig.”

“Sy soek ’n nuwe gesigspunt, Hagrid,” sê Ron waar hy koggelmanderiers sit en uitdop. “Jy moes gesê het dat Harry ’n besete jeugmisdadiger is!”

“Maar hy is nie!” sê Hagrid en hy lyk opreg geskok.

“Sy moes ’n onderhoud met Snerp gevoer het,” sê Harry grimmig. “Hy sal behoorlik oor my uitpak. *Potter oortree al reëls van die eerste dag dat hy by hierdie skool aangekom het . . .*”

“So dis wat hy sê, h’m?” sê Hagrid terwyl Ron en Hermien lag. “Wel, jy het ’n paar reëls al so ietwat omseil, Harry, maar jy’s eintlik nogal orraait, weet jy.”

“Dankie, Hagrid,” sê Harry grinnikend.

“Jy kom seker na daardie balgedoente op Kersaand, Hagrid?” sê Ron.

“Gedink ek sal my gesig kom wys,” sê Hagrid skor. “Sal seker ’n lekker makietie wees, dink ek. Julle moet die dansvloer open, hê, Harry? Wie gaan saam met jou?”

“Nog niemand nie,” sê Harry en hy voel hoe hy rooi word. Hagrid vra nie verder uit nie.

Hoe verder die laaste week van die kwartaal vorder, hoe meer uit-

huldig raak dit. Gerugte oor die Kersbal vlieg oor en weer, hoewel Harry die helfte nie glo nie – soos byvoorbeeld dat Dompeldorius agthonderd vate gekruide heuningbier by Madame Rosmerta bestel het. Dit wil egter lyk asof hy inderdaad die Skikgodinne bespreek het. Presies wie of wat die Skikgodinne is, weet Harry nie. Hy het nog nooit na 'n towenaarsradio geluister nie, maar te oordeel na die wilde opgewondenheid onder diegene wat nog altyd na die TDN (Towenaarsdraadlose-Netwerk) geluister het, is hulle 'n baie beroemde musiekgroep.

Sommige van die onderwysers, soos die kleine professor Flickerpitt, probeer nie eens meer om hulle iets te leer noudat hul aandag so duidelik nie by hul werk is nie; daardie Woensdag laat hy hulle toe om tydens sy les speletjies te speel en hy praat die meeste van die tyd met Harry oor die volmaakte Ontbiedtowerspreuk wat hy tydens die Drietowenaars-toernooi gebruik het. Ander onderwysers is nie so gulhartig nie. Niks kan byvoorbeeld vir professor Binns daarvan weerhou om deur sy notas oor gnoomrebellies te ploeg nie – as Binns se eie dood nie in die pad van sy lesse kon staan nie, sal 'n klein dingetjie soos Kersfees hom beslis nie van stryk bring nie. Dit bly egter verbasend dat hy die bloeddorstigste gnoom-opstote net so vervelig soos Percy se verslag oor hekseketelbodemds kan laat klink. Ook professors McGonagall en Moodie gee tot die laaste sekonde toe klas en Snerp sal eerder vir Harry aanneem as om hulle in klastyd te laat speletjies speel. Hy staar op sy gemene manier na elkeen van hulle en toe sê hy dat hy hulle tydens die laaste les van die kwartaal oor gifteenmiddels gaan toets.

“Gemeen, dis wat hy is,” sê Ron daardie aand bitter in die Griffindor-geselskamer. “Om sowaar op die laaste dag vir ons 'n toets te wil gee. Om die laaste stukkie van die kwartaal met 'n spul hersiening te staan en bederf.”

“Mmm . . . nie dat jy jouself nou juis ooreis nie, of hoe?” sê Hermien wat bo-oor haar Towerdrankie-notas na hom staar. Ron is besig om 'n kasteel met Ontploffkaarte te bou – dis baie interessanter as met Moggelkaarte omdat daar 'n kans is dat die hele ding enige oomblik kan opblaas.

“Dis Kersfees, Hermien,” sê Harry luiweg; hy sit in 'n leunstoel voor die vuur en is besig om *Vlieg soos uit 'n Kanon* vir die tiende keer te lees.

Hermien kyk ernstig na hom. “Ek sou verwag dat jy jou tyd meer konstruktief sal gebruik, Harry, al wil jy nie jou teenmiddels leer nie!”

“Soos met wat?” sê Harry terwyl hy kyk hoe Joey Jenkins van die Cannons 'n Moker op Ballycaster Bats se Jaer afstuur.

“Daardie eier!” sis Hermien.

“Komaan, Hermien, ek het nog tot die vier-en-twintigste Februarie toe tyd,” sê Harry.

Hy het die goue eier bo in sy trommel gesit en dit nog nie weer oopgemaak sedert die feesvierings aan die einde van die eerste taak nie. Daar

is na alles nog twee en 'n half maande voor hy hoef te weet wat daardie skreeuende gekerm nou eintlik beteken.

“Maar dit kan weke vat om dit uit te werk!” sê Hermien. “Jy gaan soos 'n regte idioot lyk as al die ander weet wat die volgende taak is, net jy nie!”

“Los hom uit, Hermien, hy verdien 'n blaaskans,” sê Ron terwyl hy die laaste twee kaarte op die kasteel pak net toe die hele spul opblaas en sy wenkbroue skroei.

“Dit pas jou, Ron . . . gaan mooi lyk by jou aandkleed.”

Dit is Fred en George. Hulle kom by die tafel by Harry, Ron en Hermien sit terwyl Ron probeer voel hoeveel skade daar is.

“Ron, kan ons vir Pigwidgeon leen?” vra George.

“Nee, hy's weg met 'n brief wat hy moet aflewer,” sê Ron. “Hoekom?”

“Omdat George hom wil vra om saam met hom bal toe te gaan,” sê Fred sarkasties.

“Omdat ons 'n brief wil stuur, jou simpel bobbejaan,” sê George.

“Vir wie skryf julle so aanmekaar, hè?” vra Ron.

“Hou jou neus daaruit, Ron, of ek brand dit ook vir jou af,” sê Fred terwyl hy sy towerstaf dreigend swaai. “So . . . het julle klomp al maats vir die bal?”

“Nee,” sê Ron.

“Wel, jy sal moet opskud, ou pêl, voor al die oulikes gevat is,” sê Fred.

“En wie gaan miskien saam met jou?” vra Ron.

“Angelina,” sê Fred sonder om te blik of te bloos.

“Wat?” sê Ron uit die veld geslaan. “Het jy haar al klaar gevra?”

“Goeie punt,” sê Fred. Hy draai sy kop en roep oor die geselskamer, “Hoei, Angelina!”

“Wat?” roep sy terug.

“Wil jy saam met my na die bal toe gaan?”

Angelina kyk opsommend na Fred.

“Goed dan,” sê sy. Toe sy terugdraai na Alicia en verder gesels, is daar 'n effense glimlaggie op haar gesig.

“Sien,” sê Fred vir Harry en Ron, “kinderspeletjies.”

Hy staan op, gaap en sê, “Dan moet ons seker maar 'n skooluil gebruik, George, komaan . . .”

Hulle stap uit. Ron vat-vat nie meer aan sy wenkbroue nie. Hy kyk na Harry oor die smeulende wrakstukke van sy kaartkasteel.

“Ons sal seker 'n plan moet maak, weet jy . . . iemand vra. Hy's reg. Netnou sit ons met twee trolle.”

Hermien sputter verontwaardig, “Twee . . . watsegoed, verskoon my?”

“Wel – jy weet,” sê Ron skouerophalend, “ek gaan liever alleen as met – wel, met Eloise Midgeon, sê maar.”

“Haar aknee is deesdae baie beter – en sy's regtig gaaf!”

“Haar neus is skeef,” sê Ron.

“O, ek sien,” sê Hermien verontwaardig. “So basies wil jy net die mooiste meisie hê wat jou sal vat, al is sy ook goor?”

“H’m – ja, dit klink min of meer reg,” sê Ron.

“Ek gaan slaap,” snou Hermien en sy storm sonder ’n verdere woord na die meisies se trappe toe.

Dit lyk asof Hogwarts se personeel vasberade is om die besoekers van Durmstrang en Beauxbatons te beïndruk en die kasteel oor Kersfees op sy beste te laat lyk. Toe die versierings opgesit word, merk Harry dat dit die mooistes is wat hy nog in die skool gesien het. Soliede ysnaalde is aan die relings van die marmertrap vasgemaak, die gewone twaalf Kersbome in die Groot Saal is oortrek met alles van liggewende hulsbessies tot egte, goue uile wat regtig hoe-hoe, en al die wapenrustings is getoor om Kersliedere te sing as iemand verbystap. Dit is nogal vreemd om ’n leë helm wat net die helfte van die woorde ken, “Kom herwaarts, getroues” te hoor sing. Fillis moet Nurks ’n hele paar keer uit die wapenrustings haal wanneer hy daarin wegkruip en die stiltes tussen die Kersliedere met lirieke vul wat hy self opgemaak het en wat almal baie onbeskof is.

En nog steeds het Harry nie vir Cho vir die bal gevra nie. Hy en Ron is al goed op hul senuwees, hoewel, soos Harry tereg sê, Ron baie minder simpel as Harry sal lyk as hy nie ’n dansmaat het nie; Harry is veronderstel om die dansbaan saam met die ander kampioene te open.

“Wel, daar is altyd Katryn Kermkous,” sê hy grimmig. Katryn is die spook in die meisiestoilet op die tweede verdieping.

“Harry – ons sal net op ons tande moet byt en dit doen,” sê Ron daardie Vrydagoggend in ’n stem wat klink asof hulle beplan om die een of ander ondeurdringbare vesting te bestorm. “As ons vanaand na die geselskamer gaan, moet ons albei iemand hê – wat sê jy?”

“H’m . . . oukei,” sê Harry.

Maar elke keer dat hy gedurende die dag vir Cho sien – tydens pouse en later met middagete en een keer op pad na Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns – is sy omring deur vriendinne. Gaan sy dan nooit eens iewers alleen nie? Kan hy haar dalk voorlê as sy kleedkamer toe gaan? Maar nee – selfs daarheen gaan vyf of ses vriendinne saam met haar. Dis net, hy sal sy sokkies moet optrek voor iemand anders hom voorspring.

Hy vind dit moeilik om tydens Snerp se Teenmiddeltoets te konsentreer en hy vergeet gevolglik om die hoofbestanddeel – ’n maagbal – in te sit, wat beteken dat hy die laagste punt kry. Hy gee egter nie om nie; hy is te besig om moed bymekaar te skraap vir dit wat hy moet doen. Toe die klok lui, gryp hy sy sak en gaan haastig na die kerker se deur toe.

“Ek sien julle vir aandete,” sê hy vir Ron en Hermien voor hy boontoe laat vat.

Hy sal net vir Cho moet sê dat hy alleen met haar wil praat, dis al . . . Hy haas hom deur die vol gange op soek na haar en kry haar (gouer as wat hy verwag het) waar sy by die Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-klas uitkom.

“H’m – Cho? Kan ek gou iets vir jou vra?”

Daar behoort ’n wet teen giggel te wees, dink Harry vererg toe al die meisies om Cho begin giggel. Sy doen dit egter nie. Sy sê, “Oukei,” en stap agter hom aan tot hulle buite hoorafstand van haar klasmaats is.

Toe Harry omdraai en na haar kyk, gee sy maag ’n nare draai asof hy ’n treetjie op pad ondertoe mis getrap het.

“E –” sê hy.

Hy kan haar nie vra nie. Hy kan net nie. Maar hy moet. Cho staan na hom en kyk en sy lyk dronkgeslaan.

Die woorde kom voor Harry sy tong nog behoortlik om hulle gevou het.

“Wi’jyme’mbybalgaan?”

“Ekskuus?” sê Cho.

“Wil jy – wil jy saam met my bal toe gaan?” sê Harry. Hoekom moet hy tog nou staan en bloos? *Hoekom?*

“O!” sê Cho en sy bloos ook. “O, Harry, ek is regtig jammer,” en sy lyk of sy is. “Ek het reeds vir iemand anders ja gesê.”

“O,” sê Harry.

Dit is snaaks; net ’n oomblik gelede het sy binnegoed nog soos slange gekriewel, maar nou voel dit skielik asof hy glad nie binnegoed het nie.

“O, oukei,” sê hy, “dit maak nie saak nie, wat.”

“Ek is regtig jammer,” sê sy weer.

“Dis oukei,” sê Harry.

Vir ’n rukkie staan hulle na mekaar en kyk en toe sê Cho, “Wel –”

“Ja,” sê Harry.

“Wel, tot siens dan,” sê Cho wat nog steeds baie rooi is. Sy stap weg. Voor hy homself kan keer, roep Harry agterna.

“Saam met wie gaan jy?”

“O – Cedric,” sê sy. “Cedric Diggory.”

“O, goed,” sê Harry.

Sy binnegoed het weer teruggekom. Dit voel asof hulle nou vol lood is.

Hy vergeet heeltemal van aandete terwyl hy stadig na die Griffindor-toring stap terwyl Cho se stem met elke tree in sy ore weerklink. “*Cedric – Cedric Diggory.*” Hy het nogal van Cedric begin hou – hy was bereid om Cedric oor te sien omdat hy hom eenkeer met Kwiddiek geklop het, ook dat hy aantreklik en gewild is en feitlik almal se gunsteling onder die kampioene is. Nou weet hy egter skielik dat Cedric niks anders as ’n niks-werd popgesiggie is nie, wat te min verstand het om in ’n eierdop te pas.

“Feëliggies,” sê hy lusteloos vir die Vet Vrou – die wagwoord het die vorige dag verander.

“Ja, inderdaad, skat!” tril sy terwyl sy haar nuwe vergulde haarband regstoot voor sy vorentoe swaai sodat hy kan ingaan.

Toe hy in die geselskamer is, kyk Harry rond en tot sy verbasing sien hy Ron met ’n vaal gesig eenkant in ’n hoek sit. Ginny sit langs hom en sy praat in ’n gedempte, strelende stem met hom.

“Wat gaan aan, Ron?” sê Harry toe hy by hulle aansluit.

Ron kyk op na Harry en daar is ’n soort blinde afgryse op sy gesig.

“Hoekom het ek dit gedoen?” sê hy wildweg. “Ek weet nie wat my besiel het nie!”

“Wat?” sê Harry.

“Hy – h’m – hy het so pas vir Fleur Delacour gevra om saam met hom bal toe te gaan,” sê Ginny. Dit lyk asof sy daarteen moet veg om nie te glimlag nie, maar sy hou aan om Ron se arm vertroostend te tik.

“Jy het *wat*?” sê Harry.

“Ek weet nie hoekom ek dit gedoen het nie!” sê Ron weer hortend. “Wat het ek gedink? Daar was mense – die wêreld vol – ek moet mal gewees het – almal het gekyk! Ek het daar in die Ingangsportaal verby haar gestap – sy’t met Diggory staan en praat – en dit het soort van by my opgekom – en toe vra ek haar!”

Ron kreun en laat sak sy gesig in sy hande. Hy hou aan praat, maar die woorde is skaars hoorbaar. “Sy’t na my gekyk asof ek ’n soort seeslak of iets is. Het nie eens geantwoord nie. En toe – ek weet nie – ek het soort van tot my sinne gekom en weggehardloop.”

“Sy’s half-Veela,” sê Harry. “Jy was reg – haar ouma was een. Dis nie jou skuld nie, ek wed jou dat jy verbygeeloop het net toe sy haar sjarme vir Diggory aangeskakel het en jy’t seker ’n skoot daarvan gekry – maar sy mors haar tyd. Hy gaan saam met Cho Chang.”

Ron kyk op.

“Ek het haar nou net gevra om saam met my te gaan,” sê Harry dofweg, “toe’t sy my gesê.”

Ginny glimlag skielik nie meer nie.

“Dit is malligheid,” sê Ron, “ons is die enigstes wat nog niemand het nie – wel, behalwe Neville. Haai – raai vir wie’t hy gevra? *Hermien!*”

“Wat?” sê Harry wie se aandag heeltemal deur hierdie verrassende nuus afgelei word.

“Ja, ek weet!” sê Ron en toe hy begin lag, kom ’n bietjie van sy ou kleur terug na sy gesig. “Hy’t na Towerdrankies vir my gesê! Het gesê dat sy altyd baie gaaf is en hom met sy werk en goed help – maar sy’t vir hom gesê dat sy klaar saam met iemand gaan. Ha! Nogal! Sy wil net nie saam met Neville gaan nie . . . ek bedoel, wie wil tog?”

“Moenie!” sê Ginny kwaai. “Moenie lag nie –”

Net toe klim Hermien deur die portretopening.

“Hoekom was julle nie by aandete nie?” sê sy toe sy by hulle kom.

“Omdat – ag, hou tog op lag, julle twee – omdat die meisies wat hulle vir die bal gevra het so pas vir hulle al twee nee gesê het,” sê Ginny.

Dit laat Harry en Ron dadelik stil word.

“Baie dankie, Ginny,” sê Ron vies.

“So is al die mooies al gevat, Ron?” sê Hermien uit die hoogte. “Begin Eloise Midgeon nou al half mooi lyk, of wat? Wel, ek is seker jy sal iewers iemand kry wat jou sal wil hê.”

Ron staar egter na Hermien asof hy haar skielik in ’n heel ander lig sien. “Hermien, Neville is reg – jy is ’n meisie . . .”

“O, baie slim,” sê sy suur.

“Wel – jy kan saam met een van ons gaan!”

“Nee, ek kan nie,” snou Hermien.

“Ag, komaan,” sê hy ongeduldig, “ons moet metgeselle hê, ons gaan regtig simpel lyk as ons niemand het nie, al die ander het . . .”

“Ek kan nie saam met julle gaan nie,” sê Hermien nou blosend, “omdat ek klaar saam met iemand gaan.”

“Nee, jy gaan nie!” sê Ron. “Jy’t dit net gesê om van Neville ontslae te raak!”

“O, het ek?” sê Hermien en haar oë flikker gevaarlik. “Net omdat dit jou drie jaar gevat het om dit agter te kom, Ron, beteken nie dat niemand anders nog raak gesien het dat ek ’n meisie is nie!”

Ron gaap haar aan. Dan grinnik hy weer.

“Oukei, oukei, ons weet dat jy ’n meisie is,” sê hy. “Is dit goed genoeg? Gaan jy nou saamkom?”

“Ek het klaar vir jou gesê!” sê Hermien baie kwaad. “Ek gaan saam met iemand anders!”

Met hierdie woorde storm sy na die meisies se trappe.

“Sy lieg,” sê Ron pront terwyl hy haar agternakyk.

“Is nie,” sê Ginny kalm.

“Nou wie is dit dan?” sê Ron skerp.

“Ek gaan nie vir jou sê nie, dis haar besigheid,” sê Ginny.

“Goed,” sê Ron wat nou besonder omgekrap lyk, “dit is regtig simpel. Ginny, jy kan saam met Harry gaan en ek sal sommer –”

“Ek kan nie,” sê Ginny en sy word ook rooi. “Ek gaan saam met – met Neville. Hy’t my gevra toe Hermien nee gesê het en ek het gedink . . . wel . . . dat ek nie andersins sal kan gaan nie omdat ek nie ’n vierdejaar is nie.” Sy lyk uiters miserabel. “Ek dink ek moet maar gaan eet,” sê sy toe sy opstaan en kop onderstebo na die portretopening loop.

Ron gaap Harry aan.

“Wat het in hulle gevaar?” vra hy.

Harry het egter so pas vir Parvati en Hildegard deur die portretopening sien inkom. Dit het tyd geword vir drastiese optrede.

“Wag hier,” sê hy vir Ron toe hy opstaan, reguit na Parvati stap en sê, “Parvati? Sal jy saam met my na die bal gaan?”

Parvati begin hulpeloos giggel. Harry wag tot sy bedaar het terwyl hy sy vingers in sy kleed se sakke gekruis hou.

“Ja, goed,” sê sy uiteindelik blosend.

“Dankie,” sê Harry verlig. “Hildegard – sal jy saam met Ron gaan?”

“Sy gaan saam met Septimus,” sê Parvati en die twee van hulle giggel nog harder as tevore.

Harry sug.

“Kan jy aan iemand dink wat saam met Ron kan gaan?” vra hy in ’n gedempte stem sodat Ron nie moet hoor nie.

“Wat van Hermien la Grange?” sê Parvati.

“Sy gaan saam met iemand anders.”

Parvati lyk verbaas.

“Ooo – wie?” vra sy gretig.

Harry haal sy skouers op. “Het nie ’n idee nie,” sê hy. “So wat van Ron?”

“Wel . . .” sê Parvati stadig, “ek dink my suster sal dalk . . . Padma, weet jy . . . in Raweklou. Ek sal haar vra as jy wil.”

“Ja, dit sal gaaf wees,” sê Harry. “Laat my weet, sal jy?”

Toe hy teruggaan na Ron, voel hy dat die bal baie meer moeite is as wat dit werd is en hoop hy van harte dat Padma Patel se neus nie skeef is nie.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



THE YULE BALL

Despite the very heavy load of homework that the fourth years had been given for the holidays, Harry was in no mood to work when term ended, and spent the week leading up to Christmas enjoying himself as fully as possible along with everyone else. Gryffindor Tower was hardly less crowded now than during term-time; it seemed to have shrunk slightly too, as its inhabitants were being so much rowdier than usual. Fred and George had had a great success with their Canary Creams, and for the first couple of days of the holidays, people kept bursting into feather all over the place. Before long, however, all the Gryffindors had learned to treat food anybody else offered them with extreme caution, in case it had a

Canary Cream concealed in the center, and George confided to Harry that he and Fred were now working on developing something else. Harry made a mental note never to accept so much as a crisp from Fred and George in future. He still hadn't forgotten Dudley and the Ton-Tongue Toffee.

Snow was falling thickly upon the castle and its grounds now. The pale blue Beauxbatons carriage looked like a large, chilly, frosted pumpkin next to the iced gingerbread house that was Hagrid's cabin, while the Durmstrang ship's portholes were glazed with ice, the rigging white with frost. The house-elves down in the kitchen were outdoing themselves with a series of rich, warming stews and savory puddings, and only Fleur Delacour seemed to be able to find anything to complain about.

"It is too 'eavy, all zis 'Ogwarts food," they heard her saying grumpily as they left the Great Hall behind her one evening (Ron skulking behind Harry, keen not to be spotted by Fleur). "I will not fit into my dress robes!"

"Oooh there's a tragedy," Hermione snapped as Fleur went out into the entrance hall. "She really thinks a lot of herself, that one, doesn't she?"

"Hermione — who are you going to the ball with?" said Ron.

He kept springing this question on her, hoping to startle her into a response by asking it when she least expected it. However, Hermione merely frowned and said, "I'm not telling you, you'll just make fun of me."

"You're joking, Weasley!" said Malfoy, behind them. "You're not telling me someone's asked *that* to the ball? Not the long-molared

Mudblood?”

Harry and Ron both whipped around, but Hermione said loudly, waving to somebody over Malfoy’s shoulder, “Hello, Professor Moody!”

Malfoy went pale and jumped backward, looking wildly around for Moody, but he was still up at the staff table, finishing his stew.

“Twitchy little ferret, aren’t you, Malfoy?” said Hermione scathingly, and she, Harry, and Ron went up the marble staircase laughing heartily.

“Hermione,” said Ron, looking sideways at her, suddenly frowning, “your teeth . . .”

“What about them?” she said.

“Well, they’re different . . . I’ve just noticed. . . .”

“Of course they are — did you expect me to keep those fangs Malfoy gave me?”

“No, I mean, they’re different to how they were before he put that hex on you. . . . They’re all . . . straight and — and normal-sized.”

Hermione suddenly smiled very mischievously, and Harry noticed it too: It was a very different smile from the one he remembered.

“Well . . . when I went up to Madam Pomfrey to get them shrunk, she held up a mirror and told me to stop her when they were back to how they normally were,” she said. “And I just . . . let her carry on a bit.” She smiled even more widely. “Mum and Dad won’t be too pleased. I’ve been trying to persuade them to let me shrink them for ages, but they wanted me to carry on with my braces. You know, they’re dentists, they just don’t think teeth and magic should — look! Pigwidgeon’s back!”

Ron's tiny owl was twittering madly on the top of the icicle-laden banisters, a scroll of parchment tied to his leg. People passing him were pointing and laughing, and a group of third-year girls paused and said, "Oh look at the weeny owl! Isn't he *cute*?"

"Stupid little feathery git!" Ron hissed, hurrying up the stairs and snatching up Pigwidgeon. "You bring letters to the addressee! You don't hang around showing off!"

Pigwidgeon hooted happily, his head protruding over Ron's fist. The third-year girls all looked very shocked.

"Clear off!" Ron snapped at them, waving the fist holding Pigwidgeon, who hooted more happily than ever as he soared through the air. "Here — take it, Harry," Ron added in an undertone as the third-year girls scuttled away looking scandalized. He pulled Sirius's reply off Pigwidgeon's leg, Harry pocketed it, and they hurried back to Gryffindor Tower to read it.

Everyone in the common room was much too busy in letting off more holiday steam to observe what anyone else was up to. Ron, Harry, and Hermione sat apart from everyone else by a dark window that was gradually filling up with snow, and Harry read out:

Dear Harry,

Congratulations on getting past the Horntail. Whoever put your name in that goblet shouldn't be feeling too happy right now! I was going to suggest a Conjunctivitis Curse, as a dragon's eyes are its weakest point — "That's what Krum did!" Hermione whispered — but your way was better, I'm impressed.

Don't get complacent, though, Harry. You've only done one task; whoever put you in for the tournament's got plenty more opportunity if they're trying to hurt you. Keep your eyes open — particularly when the person we discussed is around — and concentrate on keeping yourself out of trouble.

Keep in touch, I still want to hear about anything unusual.

Sirius

“He sounds exactly like Moody,” said Harry quietly, tucking the letter away again inside his robes. “‘Constant vigilance!’ You’d think I walk around with my eyes shut, banging off the walls. . . .”

“But he’s right, Harry,” said Hermione, “you *have* still got two tasks to do. You really ought to have a look at that egg, you know, and start working out what it means. . . .”

“Hermione, he’s got ages!” snapped Ron. “Want a game of chess, Harry?”

“Yeah, okay,” said Harry. Then, spotting the look on Hermione’s face, he said, “Come on, how’m I supposed to concentrate with all this noise going on? I won’t even be able to hear the egg over this lot.”

“Oh I suppose not,” she sighed, and she sat down to watch their chess match, which culminated in an exciting checkmate of Ron’s, involving a couple of recklessly brave pawns and a very violent bishop.

Harry awoke very suddenly on Christmas Day. Wondering what had caused his abrupt return to consciousness, he opened his eyes, and saw something with very large, round, green eyes staring back at him in the darkness, so close they were almost nose to nose.

“*Dobby!*” Harry yelled, scrambling away from the elf so fast he almost fell out of bed. “Don’t *do* that!”

“Dobby is sorry, sir!” squeaked Dobby anxiously, jumping backward with his long fingers over his mouth. “Dobby is only wanting to wish Harry Potter ‘Merry Christmas’ and bring him a present, sir! Harry Potter did say Dobby could come and see him sometimes, sir!”

“It’s okay,” said Harry, still breathing rather faster than usual, while his heart rate returned to normal. “Just — just prod me or something in future, all right, don’t bend over me like that. . . .”

Harry pulled back the curtains around his four-poster, took his glasses from his bedside table, and put them on. His yell had awoken Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville. All of them were peering through the gaps in their own hangings, heavy-eyed and tousle-haired.

“Someone attacking you, Harry?” Seamus asked sleepily.

“No, it’s just Dobby,” Harry muttered. “Go back to sleep.”

“Nah . . . presents!” said Seamus, spotting the large pile at the foot of his bed. Ron, Dean, and Neville decided that now they were awake they might as well get down to some present-opening too. Harry turned back to Dobby, who was now standing nervously next to Harry’s bed, still looking worried that he had upset Harry. There was a Christmas bauble tied to the loop on top of his tea cozy.

“Can Dobby give Harry Potter his present?” he squeaked

tentatively.

“Course you can,” said Harry. “Er . . . I’ve got something for you too.”

It was a lie; he hadn’t bought anything for Dobby at all, but he quickly opened his trunk and pulled out a particularly knobbly rolled-up pair of socks. They were his oldest and foulest, mustard yellow, and had once belonged to Uncle Vernon. The reason they were extra-knobbly was that Harry had been using them to cushion his Sneakoscope for over a year now. He pulled out the Sneakoscope and handed the socks to Dobby, saying, “Sorry, I forgot to wrap them . . .”

But Dobby was utterly delighted.

“Socks are Dobby’s favorite, favorite clothes, sir!” he said, ripping off his odd ones and pulling on Uncle Vernon’s. “I has seven now, sir. . . . But sir . . .” he said, his eyes widening, having pulled both socks up to their highest extent, so that they reached to the bottom of his shorts, “they has made a mistake in the shop, Harry Potter, they is giving you two the same!”

“Ah, no, Harry, how come you didn’t spot that?” said Ron, grinning over from his own bed, which was now strewn with wrapping paper. “Tell you what, Dobby — here you go — take these two, and you can mix them up properly. And here’s your sweater.”

He threw Dobby a pair of violet socks he had just unwrapped, and the hand-knitted sweater Mrs. Weasley had sent. Dobby looked quite overwhelmed.

“Sir is very kind!” he squeaked, his eyes brimming with tears again, bowing deeply to Ron. “Dobby knew sir must be a great

wizard, for he is Harry Potter's greatest friend, but Dobby did not know that he was also as generous of spirit, as noble, as selfless —"

"They're only socks," said Ron, who had gone slightly pink around the ears, though he looked rather pleased all the same. "Wow, Harry —" He had just opened Harry's present, a Chudley Cannon hat. "Cool!" He jammed it onto his head, where it clashed horribly with his hair.

Dobby now handed Harry a small package, which turned out to be — socks.

"Dobby is making them himself, sir!" the elf said happily. "He is buying the wool out of his wages, sir!"

The left sock was bright red and had a pattern of broomsticks upon it; the right sock was green with a pattern of Snitches.

"They're . . . they're really . . . well, thanks, Dobby," said Harry, and he pulled them on, causing Dobby's eyes to leak with happiness again.

"Dobby must go now, sir, we is already making Christmas dinner in the kitchens!" said Dobby, and he hurried out of the dormitory, waving good-bye to Ron and the others as he passed.

Harry's other presents were much more satisfactory than Dobby's odd socks — with the obvious exception of the Dursleys', which consisted of a single tissue, an all-time low — Harry supposed they too were remembering the Ton-Tongue Toffee. Hermione had given Harry a book called *Quidditch Teams of Britain and Ireland*; Ron, a bulging bag of Dungbombs; Sirius, a handy penknife with attachments to unlock any lock and undo any knot; and Hagrid, a vast box of sweets including all Harry's favorites: Bertie Bott's Every Flavor

Beans, Chocolate Frogs, Drooble's Best Blowing Gum, and Fizzing Whizbees. There was also, of course, Mrs. Weasley's usual package, including a new sweater (green, with a picture of a dragon on it — Harry supposed Charlie had told her all about the Horntail), and a large quantity of homemade mince pies.

Harry and Ron met up with Hermione in the common room, and they went down to breakfast together. They spent most of the morning in Gryffindor Tower, where everyone was enjoying their presents, then returned to the Great Hall for a magnificent lunch, which included at least a hundred turkeys and Christmas puddings, and large piles of Cribbage's Wizarding Crackers.

They went out onto the grounds in the afternoon; the snow was untouched except for the deep channels made by the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students on their way up to the castle. Hermione chose to watch Harry and the Weasleys' snowball fight rather than join in, and at five o'clock said she was going back upstairs to get ready for the ball.

"What, you need three hours?" said Ron, looking at her incredulously and paying for his lapse in concentration when a large snowball, thrown by George, hit him hard on the side of the head. "Who're you going with?" he yelled after Hermione, but she just waved and disappeared up the stone steps into the castle.

There was no Christmas tea today, as the ball included a feast, so at seven o'clock, when it had become hard to aim properly, the others abandoned their snowball fight and trooped back to the common room. The Fat Lady was sitting in her frame with her friend Violet from downstairs, both of them extremely tipsy, empty boxes of

chocolate liqueurs littering the bottom of her picture.

“Lairy fights, that’s the one!” she giggled when they gave the password, and she swung forward to let them inside.

Harry, Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville changed into their dress robes up in their dormitory, all of them looking very self-conscious, but none as much as Ron, who surveyed himself in the long mirror in the corner with an appalled look on his face. There was just no getting around the fact that his robes looked more like a dress than anything else. In a desperate attempt to make them look more manly, he used a Severing Charm on the ruff and cuffs. It worked fairly well; at least he was now lace-free, although he hadn’t done a very neat job, and the edges still looked depressingly frayed as the boys set off downstairs.

“I still can’t work out how you two got the best-looking girls in the year,” muttered Dean.

“Animal magnetism,” said Ron gloomily, pulling stray threads out of his cuffs.

The common room looked strange, full of people wearing different colors instead of the usual mass of black. Parvati was waiting for Harry at the foot of the stairs. She looked very pretty indeed, in robes of shocking pink, with her long dark plait braided with gold, and gold bracelets glimmering at her wrists. Harry was relieved to see that she wasn’t giggling.

“You — er — look nice,” he said awkwardly.

“Thanks,” she said. “Padma’s going to meet you in the entrance hall,” she added to Ron.

“Right,” said Ron, looking around. “Where’s Hermione?”

Parvati shrugged. "Shall we go down then, Harry?"

"Okay," said Harry, wishing he could just stay in the common room. Fred winked at Harry as he passed him on the way out of the portrait hole.

The entrance hall was packed with students too, all milling around waiting for eight o'clock, when the doors to the Great Hall would be thrown open. Those people who were meeting partners from different Houses were edging through the crowd trying to find one another. Parvati found her sister, Padma, and led her over to Harry and Ron.

"Hi," said Padma, who was looking just as pretty as Parvati in robes of bright turquoise. She didn't look too enthusiastic about having Ron as a partner, though; her dark eyes lingered on the frayed neck and sleeves of his dress robes as she looked him up and down.

"Hi," said Ron, not looking at her, but staring around at the crowd. "Oh no . . ."

He bent his knees slightly to hide behind Harry, because Fleur Delacour was passing, looking stunning in robes of silver-gray satin, and accompanied by the Ravenclaw Quidditch Captain, Roger Davies. When they had disappeared, Ron stood straight again and stared over the heads of the crowd.

"Where *is* Hermione?" he said again.

A group of Slytherins came up the steps from their dungeon common room. Malfoy was in front; he was wearing dress robes of black velvet with a high collar, which in Harry's opinion made him look like a vicar. Pansy Parkinson in very frilly robes of pale pink was clutching Malfoy's arm. Crabbe and Goyle were both wearing green; they resembled moss-colored boulders, and neither of them,

Harry was pleased to see, had managed to find a partner.

The oak front doors opened, and everyone turned to look as the Durmstrang students entered with Professor Karkaroff. Krum was at the front of the party, accompanied by a pretty girl in blue robes Harry didn't know. Over their heads he saw that an area of lawn right in front of the castle had been transformed into a sort of grotto full of fairy lights — meaning hundreds of actual living fairies were sitting in the rosebushes that had been conjured there, and fluttering over the statues of what seemed to be Father Christmas and his reindeer.

Then Professor McGonagall's voice called, "Champions over here, please!"

Parvati readjusted her bangles, beaming; she and Harry said "See you in a minute" to Ron and Padma and walked forward, the chattering crowd parting to let them through. Professor McGonagall, who was wearing dress robes of red tartan and had arranged a rather ugly wreath of thistles around the brim of her hat, told them to wait on one side of the doors while everyone else went inside; they were to enter the Great Hall in procession when the rest of the students had sat down. Fleur Delacour and Roger Davies stationed themselves nearest the doors; Davies looked so stunned by his good fortune in having Fleur for a partner that he could hardly take his eyes off her. Cedric and Cho were close to Harry too; he looked away from them so he wouldn't have to talk to them. His eyes fell instead on the girl next to Krum. His jaw dropped.

It was Hermione.

But she didn't look like Hermione at all. She had done something with her hair; it was no longer bushy but sleek and shiny, and twisted

up into an elegant knot at the back of her head. She was wearing robes made of a floaty, periwinkle-blue material, and she was holding herself differently, somehow — or maybe it was merely the absence of the twenty or so books she usually had slung over her back. She was also smiling — rather nervously, it was true — but the reduction in the size of her front teeth was more noticeable than ever; Harry couldn't understand how he hadn't spotted it before.

“Hi, Harry!” she said. “Hi, Parvati!”

Parvati was gazing at Hermione in unflattering disbelief. She wasn't the only one either; when the doors to the Great Hall opened, Krum's fan club from the library stalked past, throwing Hermione looks of deepest loathing. Pansy Parkinson gaped at her as she walked by with Malfoy, and even he didn't seem to be able to find an insult to throw at her. Ron, however, walked right past Hermione without looking at her.

Once everyone else was settled in the Hall, Professor McGonagall told the champions and their partners to get in line in pairs and to follow her. They did so, and everyone in the Great Hall applauded as they entered and started walking up toward a large round table at the top of the Hall, where the judges were sitting.

The walls of the Hall had all been covered in sparkling silver frost, with hundreds of garlands of mistletoe and ivy crossing the starry black ceiling. The House tables had vanished; instead, there were about a hundred smaller, lantern-lit ones, each seating about a dozen people.

Harry concentrated on not tripping over his feet. Parvati seemed to be enjoying herself; she was beaming around at everybody, steering

Harry so forcefully that he felt as though he were a show dog she was putting through its paces. He caught sight of Ron and Padma as he neared the top table. Ron was watching Hermione pass with narrowed eyes. Padma was looking sulky.

Dumbledore smiled happily as the champions approached the top table, but Karkaroff wore an expression remarkably like Ron's as he watched Krum and Hermione draw nearer. Ludo Bagman, tonight in robes of bright purple with large yellow stars, was clapping as enthusiastically as any of the students; and Madame Maxime, who had changed her usual uniform of black satin for a flowing gown of lavender silk, was applauding them politely. But Mr. Crouch, Harry suddenly realized, was not there. The fifth seat at the table was occupied by Percy Weasley.

When the champions and their partners reached the table, Percy drew out the empty chair beside him, staring pointedly at Harry. Harry took the hint and sat down next to Percy, who was wearing brand-new, navy-blue dress robes and an expression of such smugness that Harry thought it ought to be fined.

"I've been promoted," Percy said before Harry could even ask, and from his tone, he might have been announcing his election as supreme ruler of the universe. "I'm now Mr. Crouch's personal assistant, and I'm here representing him."

"Why didn't he come?" Harry asked. He wasn't looking forward to being lectured on cauldron bottoms all through dinner.

"I'm afraid to say Mr. Crouch isn't well, not well at all. Hasn't been right since the World Cup. Hardly surprising — overwork. He's not as young as he was — though still quite brilliant, of course, the

mind remains as great as it ever was. But the World Cup was a fiasco for the whole Ministry, and then, Mr. Crouch suffered a huge personal shock with the misbehavior of that house-elf of his, Blinky, or whatever she was called. Naturally, he dismissed her immediately afterward, but — well, as I say, he's getting on, he needs looking after, and I think he's found a definite drop in his home comforts since she left. And then we had the tournament to arrange, and the aftermath of the Cup to deal with — that revolting Skeeter woman buzzing around — no, poor man, he's having a well-earned, quiet Christmas. I'm just glad he knew he had someone he could rely upon to take his place.”

Harry wanted very much to ask whether Mr. Crouch had stopped calling Percy “Weatherby” yet, but resisted the temptation.

There was no food as yet on the glittering golden plates, but small menus were lying in front of each of them. Harry picked his up uncertainly and looked around — there were no waiters. Dumbledore, however, looked carefully down at his own menu, then said very clearly to his plate, “Pork chops!”

And pork chops appeared. Getting the idea, the rest of the table placed their orders with their plates too. Harry glanced up at Hermione to see how she felt about this new and more complicated method of dining — surely it meant plenty of extra work for the house-elves? — but for once, Hermione didn't seem to be thinking about S.P.E.W. She was deep in talk with Viktor Krum and hardly seemed to notice what she was eating.

It now occurred to Harry that he had never actually heard Krum speak before, but he was certainly talking now, and very

enthusiastically at that.

“Vell, ve have a castle also, not as big as this, nor as comfortable, I am thinking,” he was telling Hermione. “Ve have just four floors, and the fires are lit only for magical purposes. But ve have grounds larger even than these — though in vinter, ve have very little daylight, so ve are not enjoying them. But in summer ve are flying every day, over the lakes and the mountains —”

“Now, now, Viktor!” said Karkaroff with a laugh that didn’t reach his cold eyes, “don’t go giving away anything else, now, or your charming friend will know exactly where to find us!”

Dumbledore smiled, his eyes twinkling. “Igor, all this secrecy . . . one would almost think you didn’t want visitors.”

“Well, Dumbledore,” said Karkaroff, displaying his yellowing teeth to their fullest extent, “we are all protective of our private domains, are we not? Do we not jealously guard the halls of learning that have been entrusted to us? Are we not right to be proud that we alone know our school’s secrets, and right to protect them?”

“Oh I would never dream of assuming I know all Hogwarts’ secrets, Igor,” said Dumbledore amicably. “Only this morning, for instance, I took a wrong turning on the way to the bathroom and found myself in a beautifully proportioned room I have never seen before, containing a really rather magnificent collection of chamber pots. When I went back to investigate more closely, I discovered that the room had vanished. But I must keep an eye out for it. Possibly it is only accessible at five-thirty in the morning. Or it may only appear at the quarter moon — or when the seeker has an exceptionally full bladder.”

Harry snorted into his plate of goulash. Percy frowned, but Harry could have sworn Dumbledore had given him a very small wink.

Meanwhile Fleur Delacour was criticizing the Hogwarts decorations to Roger Davies.

“Zis is nothing,” she said dismissively, looking around at the sparkling walls of the Great Hall. “At ze Palace of Beauxbatons, we ’ave ice sculptures all around ze dining chamber at Chreestmas. Zey do not melt, of course . . . zey are like ’uge statues of diamond, glittering around ze place. And ze food is seemply superb. And we ’ave choirs of wood nymphs, ’oo serenade us as we eat. We ’ave none of zis ugly armor in ze ’alls, and eef a poltergeist ever entaired into Beauxbatons, ’e would be expelled like *zat*.” She slapped her hand onto the table impatiently.

Roger Davies was watching her talk with a very dazed look on his face, and he kept missing his mouth with his fork. Harry had the impression that Davies was too busy staring at Fleur to take in a word she was saying.

“Absolutely right,” he said quickly, slapping his own hand down on the table in imitation of Fleur. “Like *that*. Yeah.”

Harry looked around the Hall. Hagrid was sitting at one of the other staff tables; he was back in his horrible hairy brown suit and gazing up at the top table. Harry saw him give a small wave, and looking around, saw Madame Maxime return it, her opals glittering in the candlelight.

Hermione was now teaching Krum to say her name properly; he kept calling her “Hermy-own.”

“Her-my-oh-nee,” she said slowly and clearly.

“Herm-own-ninny.”

“Close enough,” she said, catching Harry’s eye and grinning.

When all the food had been consumed, Dumbledore stood up and asked the students to do the same. Then, with a wave of his wand, all the tables zoomed back along the walls leaving the floor clear, and then he conjured a raised platform into existence along the right wall. A set of drums, several guitars, a lute, a cello, and some bagpipes were set upon it.

The Weird Sisters now trooped up onto the stage to wildly enthusiastic applause; they were all extremely hairy and dressed in black robes that had been artfully ripped and torn. They picked up their instruments, and Harry, who had been so interested in watching them that he had almost forgotten what was coming, suddenly realized that the lanterns on all the other tables had gone out, and that the other champions and their partners were standing up.

“Come on!” Parvati hissed. “We’re supposed to dance!”

Harry tripped over his dress robes as he stood up. The Weird Sisters struck up a slow, mournful tune; Harry walked onto the brightly lit dance floor, carefully avoiding catching anyone’s eye (he could see Seamus and Dean waving at him and sniggering), and next moment, Parvati had seized his hands, placed one around her waist, and was holding the other tightly in hers.

It wasn’t as bad as it could have been, Harry thought, revolving slowly on the spot (Parvati was steering). He kept his eyes fixed over the heads of the watching people, and very soon many of them too had come onto the dance floor, so that the champions were no longer the center of attention. Neville and Ginny were dancing nearby

— he could see Ginny wincing frequently as Neville trod on her feet — and Dumbledore was waltzing with Madame Maxime. He was so dwarfed by her that the top of his pointed hat barely tickled her chin; however, she moved very gracefully for a woman so large. Mad-Eye Moody was doing an extremely ungainly two-step with Professor Sinistra, who was nervously avoiding his wooden leg.

“Nice socks, Potter,” Moody growled as he passed, his magical eye staring through Harry’s robes.

“Oh — yeah, Dobby the house-elf knitted them for me,” said Harry, grinning.

“He is so *creepy*!” Parvati whispered as Moody clunked away. “I don’t think that eye should be *allowed*!”

Harry heard the final, quavering note from the bagpipe with relief. The Weird Sisters stopped playing, applause filled the hall once more, and Harry let go of Parvati at once.

“Let’s sit down, shall we?”

“Oh — but — this is a really good one!” Parvati said as the Weird Sisters struck up a new song, which was much faster.

“No, I don’t like it,” Harry lied, and he led her away from the dance floor, past Fred and Angelina, who were dancing so exuberantly that people around them were backing away in fear of injury, and over to the table where Ron and Padma were sitting.

“How’s it going?” Harry asked Ron, sitting down and opening a bottle of butterbeer.

Ron didn’t answer. He was glaring at Hermione and Krum, who were dancing nearby. Padma was sitting with her arms and legs crossed, one foot jiggling in time to the music. Every now and then

she threw a disgruntled look at Ron, who was completely ignoring her. Parvati sat down on Harry's other side, crossed her arms and legs too, and within minutes was asked to dance by a boy from Beauxbatons.

"You don't mind, do you, Harry?" Parvati said.

"What?" said Harry, who was now watching Cho and Cedric.

"Oh never mind," snapped Parvati, and she went off with the boy from Beauxbatons. When the song ended, she did not return.

Hermione came over and sat down in Parvati's empty chair. She was a bit pink in the face from dancing.

"Hi," said Harry. Ron didn't say anything.

"It's hot, isn't it?" said Hermione, fanning herself with her hand.

"Viktor's just gone to get some drinks."

Ron gave her a withering look. "*Viktor?*" he said. "Hasn't he asked you to call him *Vicky* yet?"

Hermione looked at him in surprise. "What's up with you?" she said.

"If you don't know," said Ron scathingly, "I'm not going to tell you."

Hermione stared at him, then at Harry, who shrugged.

"Ron, what — ?"

"He's from Durmstrang!" spat Ron. "He's competing against Harry! Against Hogwarts! You — you're —" Ron was obviously casting around for words strong enough to describe Hermione's crime, "*fraternizing with the enemy*, that's what you're doing!"

Hermione's mouth fell open.

“Don’t be so stupid!” she said after a moment. “The *enemy*! Honestly — who was the one who was all excited when they saw him arrive? Who was the one who wanted his autograph? Who’s got a model of him up in their dormitory?”

Ron chose to ignore this. “I s’pose he asked you to come with him while you were both in the library?”

“Yes, he did,” said Hermione, the pink patches on her cheeks glowing more brightly. “So what?”

“What happened — trying to get him to join *spew*, were you?”

“No, I wasn’t! If you *really* want to know, he — he said he’d been coming up to the library every day to try and talk to me, but he hadn’t been able to pluck up the courage!”

Hermione said this very quickly, and blushed so deeply that she was the same color as Parvati’s robes.

“Yeah, well — that’s his story,” said Ron nastily.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Obvious, isn’t it? He’s Karkaroff’s student, isn’t he? He knows who you hang around with. . . . He’s just trying to get closer to Harry — get inside information on him — or get near enough to jinx him —”

Hermione looked as though Ron had slapped her. When she spoke, her voice quivered.

“For your information, he hasn’t asked me *one single thing* about Harry, not one —”

Ron changed tack at the speed of light.

“Then he’s hoping you’ll help him find out what his egg means! I suppose you’ve been putting your heads together during those cozy

little library sessions —”

“I’d *never* help him work out that egg!” said Hermione, looking outraged. “*Never*. How could you say something like that — I want Harry to win the tournament, Harry knows that, don’t you, Harry?”

“You’ve got a funny way of showing it,” sneered Ron.

“This whole tournament’s supposed to be about getting to know foreign wizards and making friends with them!” said Hermione hotly.

“No it isn’t!” shouted Ron. “It’s about winning!”

People were starting to stare at them.

“Ron,” said Harry quietly, “I haven’t got a problem with Hermione coming with Krum —”

But Ron ignored Harry too.

“Why don’t you go and find Vicky, he’ll be wondering where you are,” said Ron.

“*Don’t call him Vicky!*”

Hermione jumped to her feet and stormed off across the dance floor, disappearing into the crowd. Ron watched her go with a mixture of anger and satisfaction on his face.

“Are you going to ask me to dance at all?” Padma asked him.

“No,” said Ron, still glaring after Hermione.

“Fine,” snapped Padma, and she got up and went to join Parvati and the Beauxbatons boy, who conjured up one of his friends to join them so fast that Harry could have sworn he had zoomed him there by a Summoning Charm.

“Vare is Herm-own-ninny?” said a voice.

Krum had just arrived at their table clutching two butterbeers.

“No idea,” said Ron mulishly, looking up at him. “Lost her, have you?”

Krum was looking surly again.

“Vell, if you see her, tell her I haff drinks,” he said, and he slouched off.

“Made friends with Viktor Krum, have you, Ron?”

Percy had hustled over, rubbing his hands together and looking extremely pompous. “Excellent! That’s the whole point, you know — international magical cooperation!”

To Harry’s displeasure, Percy now took Padma’s vacated seat. The top table was now empty; Professor Dumbledore was dancing with Professor Sprout, Ludo Bagman with Professor McGonagall; Madame Maxime and Hagrid were cutting a wide path around the dance floor as they waltzed through the students, and Karkaroff was nowhere to be seen. When the next song ended, everybody applauded once more, and Harry saw Ludo Bagman kiss Professor McGonagall’s hand and make his way back through the crowds, at which point Fred and George accosted him.

“What do they think they’re doing, annoying senior Ministry members?” Percy hissed, watching Fred and George suspiciously. “*No respect . . .*”

Ludo Bagman shook off Fred and George fairly quickly, however, and, spotting Harry, waved and came over to their table.

“I hope my brothers weren’t bothering you, Mr. Bagman?” said Percy at once.

“What? Oh not at all, not at all!” said Bagman. “No, they were just telling me a bit more about those fake wands of theirs. Wondering if I

could advise them on the marketing. I've promised to put them in touch with a couple of contacts of mine at Zonko's Joke Shop. . . ."

Percy didn't look happy about this at all, and Harry was prepared to bet he would be rushing to tell Mrs. Weasley about this the moment he got home. Apparently Fred and George's plans had grown even more ambitious lately, if they were hoping to sell to the public. Bagman opened his mouth to ask Harry something, but Percy diverted him.

"How do you feel the tournament's going, Mr. Bagman? *Our* department's quite satisfied — the hitch with the Goblet of Fire" — he glanced at Harry — "was a little unfortunate, of course, but it seems to have gone very smoothly since, don't you think?"

"Oh yes," Bagman said cheerfully, "it's all been enormous fun. How's old Barty doing? Shame he couldn't come."

"Oh I'm sure Mr. Crouch will be up and about in no time," said Percy importantly, "but in the meantime, I'm more than willing to take up the slack. Of course, it's not all attending balls" — he laughed airily — "oh no, I've had to deal with all sorts of things that have cropped up in his absence — you heard Ali Bashir was caught smuggling a consignment of flying carpets into the country? And then we've been trying to persuade the Transylvanians to sign the International Ban on Dueling. I've got a meeting with their Head of Magical Cooperation in the new year —"

"Let's go for a walk," Ron muttered to Harry, "get away from Percy. . . ."

Pretending they wanted more drinks, Harry and Ron left the table, edged around the dance floor, and slipped out into the entrance hall.

The front doors stood open, and the fluttering fairy lights in the rose garden winked and twinkled as they went down the front steps, where they found themselves surrounded by bushes; winding, ornamental paths; and large stone statues. Harry could hear splashing water, which sounded like a fountain. Here and there, people were sitting on carved benches. He and Ron set off along one of the winding paths through the rosebushes, but they had gone only a short way when they heard an unpleasantly familiar voice.

“... don’t see what there is to fuss about, Igor.”

“Severus, you cannot pretend this isn’t happening!” Karkaroff’s voice sounded anxious and hushed, as though keen not to be overheard. “It’s been getting clearer and clearer for months. I am becoming seriously concerned, I can’t deny it —”

“Then flee,” said Snape’s voice curtly. “Flee — I will make your excuses. I, however, am remaining at Hogwarts.”

Snape and Karkaroff came around the corner. Snape had his wand out and was blasting rosebushes apart, his expression most ill-natured. Squeals issued from many of the bushes, and dark shapes emerged from them.

“Ten points from Ravenclaw, Fawcett!” Snape snarled as a girl ran past him. “And ten points from Hufflepuff too, Stebbins!” as a boy went rushing after her. “And what are you two doing?” he added, catching sight of Harry and Ron on the path ahead. Karkaroff, Harry saw, looked slightly discomposed to see them standing there. His hand went nervously to his goatee, and he began winding it around his finger.

“We’re walking,” Ron told Snape shortly. “Not against the law, is

it?”

“Keep walking, then!” Snape snarled, and he brushed past them, his long black cloak billowing out behind him. Karkaroff hurried away after Snape. Harry and Ron continued down the path.

“What’s got Karkaroff all worried?” Ron muttered.

“And since when have he and Snape been on first-name terms?” said Harry slowly.

They had reached a large stone reindeer now, over which they could see the sparkling jets of a tall fountain. The shadowy outlines of two enormous people were visible on a stone bench, watching the water in the moonlight. And then Harry heard Hagrid speak.

“Momen’ I saw yeh, I knew,” he was saying, in an oddly husky voice.

Harry and Ron froze. This didn’t sound like the sort of scene they ought to walk in on, somehow. . . . Harry looked around, back up the path, and saw Fleur Delacour and Roger Davies standing half-concealed in a rosebush nearby. He tapped Ron on the shoulder and jerked his head toward them, meaning that they could easily sneak off that way without being noticed (Fleur and Davies looked very busy to Harry), but Ron, eyes widening in horror at the sight of Fleur, shook his head vigorously, and pulled Harry deeper into the shadows behind the reindeer.

“What did you know, ’Agrid?” said Madame Maxime, a purr in her low voice.

Harry definitely didn’t want to listen to this; he knew Hagrid would hate to be overheard in a situation like this (he certainly would have) — if it had been possible he would have put his fingers

in his ears and hummed loudly, but that wasn't really an option. Instead he tried to interest himself in a beetle crawling along the stone reindeer's back, but the beetle just wasn't interesting enough to block out Hagrid's next words.

"I jus' knew . . . knew you were like me. . . . Was it yer mother or yer father?"

"I — I don't know what you mean, 'Agrid. . . ."

"It was my mother," said Hagrid quietly. "She was one o' the las' ones in Britain. 'Course, I can' remember her too well . . . she left, see. When I was abou' three. She wasn' really the maternal sort. Well . . . it's not in their natures, is it? Dunno what happened to her . . . might be dead fer all I know. . . ."

Madame Maxime didn't say anything. And Harry, in spite of himself, took his eyes off the beetle and looked over the top of the reindeer's antlers, listening. . . . He had never heard Hagrid talk about his childhood before.

"Me dad was broken-hearted when she wen'. Tiny little bloke, my dad was. By the time I was six I could lift him up an' put him on top o' the dresser if he annoyed me. Used ter make him laugh. . . ." Hagrid's deep voice broke. Madame Maxime was listening, motionless, apparently staring at the silvery fountain. "Dad raised me . . . but he died, o' course, jus' after I started school. Sorta had ter make me own way after that. Dumbledore was a real help, mind. Very kind ter me, he was. . . ."

Hagrid pulled out a large spotted silk handkerchief and blew his nose heavily.

"So . . . anyway . . . enough abou' me. What about you? Which side

you got it on?"

But Madame Maxime had suddenly got to her feet.

"It is chilly," she said — but whatever the weather was doing, it was nowhere near as cold as her voice. "I think I will go in now."

"Eh?" said Hagrid blankly. "No, don' go! I've — I've never met another one before!"

"Anuzzer *what*, precisely?" said Madame Maxime, her tone icy.

Harry could have told Hagrid it was best not to answer; he stood there in the shadows gritting his teeth, hoping against hope he wouldn't — but it was no good.

"Another half-giant, o' course!" said Hagrid.

"Ow dare you!" shrieked Madame Maxime. Her voice exploded through the peaceful night air like a foghorn; behind him, Harry heard Fleur and Roger fall out of their rosebush. "I 'ave nevair been more insulted in my life! 'Alf-giant? *Moi*? I 'ave — I 'ave big bones!"

She stormed away; great multicolored swarms of fairies rose into the air as she passed, angrily pushing aside bushes. Hagrid was still sitting on the bench, staring after her. It was much too dark to make out his expression. Then, after about a minute, he stood up and strode away, not back to the castle, but off out into the dark grounds in the direction of his cabin.

"C'mon," Harry said, very quietly to Ron. "Let's go. . . ."

But Ron didn't move.

"What's up?" said Harry, looking at him.

Ron looked around at Harry, his expression very serious indeed.

"Did you know?" he whispered. "About Hagrid being half-giant?"

“No,” Harry said, shrugging. “So what?”

He knew immediately, from the look Ron was giving him, that he was once again revealing his ignorance of the Wizarding world. Brought up by the Dursleys, there were many things that wizards took for granted that were revelations to Harry, but these surprises had become fewer with each successive year. Now, however, he could tell that most wizards would not have said “So what?” upon finding out that one of their friends had a giantess for a mother.

“I’ll explain inside,” said Ron quietly, “c’mon. . . .”

Fleur and Roger Davies had disappeared, probably into a more private clump of bushes. Harry and Ron returned to the Great Hall. Parvati and Padma were now sitting at a distant table with a whole crowd of Beauxbatons boys, and Hermione was once more dancing with Krum. Harry and Ron sat down at a table far removed from the dance floor.

“So?” Harry prompted Ron. “What’s the problem with giants?”

“Well, they’re . . . they’re . . .” Ron struggled for words. “. . . not very nice,” he finished lamely.

“Who cares?” Harry said. “There’s nothing wrong with Hagrid!”

“I know there isn’t, but . . . blimey, no wonder he keeps it quiet,” Ron said, shaking his head. “I always thought he’d got in the way of a bad Engorgement Charm when he was a kid or something. Didn’t like to mention it. . . .”

“But what’s it matter if his mother was a giantess?” said Harry.

“Well . . . no one who knows him will care, ’cos they’ll know he’s not dangerous,” said Ron slowly. “But . . . Harry, they’re just vicious, giants. It’s like Hagrid said, it’s in their natures, they’re like trolls . . .

they just like killing, everyone knows that. There aren't any left in Britain now, though."

"What happened to them?"

"Well, they were dying out anyway, and then loads got themselves killed by Aurors. There're supposed to be giants abroad, though. . . . They hide out in mountains mostly. . . ."

"I don't know who Maxime thinks she's kidding," Harry said, watching Madame Maxime sitting alone at the judges' table, looking very somber. "If Hagrid's half-giant, she definitely is. Big bones . . . the only thing that's got bigger bones than her is a dinosaur."

Harry and Ron spent the rest of the ball discussing giants in their corner, neither of them having any inclination to dance. Harry tried not to watch Cho and Cedric too much; it gave him a strong desire to kick something.

When the Weird Sisters finished playing at midnight, everyone gave them a last, loud round of applause and started to wend their way into the entrance hall. Many people were expressing the wish that the ball could have gone on longer, but Harry was perfectly happy to be going to bed; as far as he was concerned, the evening hadn't been much fun.

Out in the entrance hall, Harry and Ron saw Hermione saying good night to Krum before he went back to the Durmstrang ship. She gave Ron a very cold look and swept past him up the marble staircase without speaking. Harry and Ron followed her, but halfway up the staircase Harry heard someone calling him.

"Hey — Harry!"

It was Cedric Diggory. Harry could see Cho waiting for him in the

entrance hall below.

“Yeah?” said Harry coldly as Cedric ran up the stairs toward him.

Cedric looked as though he didn’t want to say whatever it was in front of Ron, who shrugged, looking bad-tempered, and continued to climb the stairs.

“Listen . . .” Cedric lowered his voice as Ron disappeared. “I owe you one for telling me about the dragons. You know that golden egg? Does yours wail when you open it?”

“Yeah,” said Harry.

“Well . . . take a bath, okay?”

“What?”

“Take a bath, and — er — take the egg with you, and — er — just mull things over in the hot water. It’ll help you think. . . . Trust me.”

Harry stared at him.

“Tell you what,” Cedric said, “use the prefects’ bathroom. Fourth door to the left of that statue of Boris the Bewildered on the fifth floor. Password’s ‘pine fresh.’ Gotta go . . . want to say good night —”

He grinned at Harry again and hurried back down the stairs to Cho.

Harry walked back to Gryffindor Tower alone. That had been extremely strange advice. Why would a bath help him to work out what the wailing egg meant? Was Cedric pulling his leg? Was he trying to make Harry look like a fool, so Cho would like him even more by comparison?

The Fat Lady and her friend Vi were snoozing in the picture over the portrait hole. Harry had to yell “Fairy lights!” before he woke them up, and when he did, they were extremely irritated. He climbed

into the common room and found Ron and Hermione having a blazing row. Standing ten feet apart, they were bellowing at each other, each scarlet in the face.

“Well, if you don’t like it, you know what the solution is, don’t you?” yelled Hermione; her hair was coming down out of its elegant bun now, and her face was screwed up in anger.

“Oh yeah?” Ron yelled back. “What’s that?”

“Next time there’s a ball, ask me before someone else does, and not as a last resort!”

Ron mouthed soundlessly like a goldfish out of water as Hermione turned on her heel and stormed up the girls’ staircase to bed. Ron turned to look at Harry.

“Well,” he sputtered, looking thunderstruck, “well — that just proves — completely missed the point —”

Harry didn’t say anything. He liked being back on speaking terms with Ron too much to speak his mind right now — but he somehow thought that Hermione had gotten the point much better than Ron had.

Die Kersbal

Ten spyte van die feit dat die vierdejaars 'n groot klomp huiswerk vir die vakansie gekry het, is Harry glad nie in die bui om te werk toe die kwartaal tot 'n einde kom nie. Soos al die ander geniet hy die week voor Kersfees terdeë. Die Griffindortoring is feitlik net so vol soos gedurende die kwartaal; dit voel boonop asof dit effens gekrimp het, want die inwoners is baie meer uitgelate as gewoonlik. Fred en George se Kanarieroompies is 'n reusesukses en tydens die eerste paar dae van die vakansie raak mens gedurig oortrek met vere. Kort voor lank het al die Griffindors egter geleer om enige kos wat iemand anders vir hulle aanbied, baie versigtig te benader ingeval 'n Kanarieroompie binne-in versteek is, en George erken teenoor Harry dat hy en Fred besig is om iets anders te maak. Harry maak 'n knoop in sy gedagtes om in die toekoms nie eens 'n enkele aartappelskyfie by Fred of George te neem nie. Hy het nog nie van Dudley en die Tontongtoffie vergeet nie.

Die sneeu lê reeds dik op die kasteel en oor die terrein. Die bleekblou Beauxbatons-koets lyk soos 'n groot, bevrore pampoen langs die verysde gemmerbroodhuisie wat Hagrid se hut is, terwyl die Durmstrang-skip se patryspoorte met ys geglasuur en die takelwerk wit van die ryp is. Die huiselwe onder in die kombuis oortref hulself met 'n verskeidenheid warm stowegeregte en geurige poedings en dis net Fleur Delacour wat iets kry om oor te kla.

“Dit is te swaar, al hierdie 'Ogwartskos,” hoor hulle haar iesegrimmig sê toe hulle een aand agter haar by die Groot Saal uitstap (Ron kruip agter Harry weg sodat Fleur hom nie moet sien nie). “Ek sal nie in my aandkleed kom nie!”

“Oee, dis 'n tragedie,” sê Hermien katterig toe Fleur by die Ingangsportaal instap. “Sy dink regtig baie van haarself, nê?”

“Hermien – saam met wie gaan jy bal toe?” vra Ron.

Hy vra hierdie vraag elke nou en dan vir haar wanneer sy dit glad nie ver wag nie, in die hoop dat hy haar onkant sal vang. Hermien frons egter net en sê, “Ek gaan nie vir jou sê nie, jy sal my net weer spot.”

“Jy maak seker 'n grap, Weasley?” sê Malfoy agter hulle. “Jy wil tog nie

vir my sê dat iemand hierdie ding vir die bal gevra het nie? Hierdie lang-tand-Modderbloeder?"

Harry en Ron swaai albei om, maar Hermien sê hard terwyl sy oor Malfoy se skouer vir iemand waai, "O, hallo, professor Moodie!"

Malfoy word bleek en spring agteruit terwyl hy verwilderd rondkyk om te sien waar Moodie is, maar hy is nog steeds by die personeeltafel besig om sy bredie te eet.

"Jy's maar 'n bewerige klein muishond, of hoe, Malfoy?" sê Hermien honend toe sy, Harry en Ron laggend met die marmertrappe opstap.

"Hermien," sê Ron terwyl hy sydelings na haar kyk en skielik frons, "jou tande . . ."

"Wat van hulle?" sê sy.

"Wel, hulle is anders . . . ek het dit nou eers opgelet . . ."

"Natuurlik is hulle – het jy verwag dat ek daardie slagande wat Malfoy vir my gegee het, moet hou?"

"Nee, ek bedoel, hulle is anders as wat hulle was voor hy daardie vloek op jou gesit het . . . hulle is . . . reguit en – en 'n gewone grootte."

Hermien glimlag skielik ondeund en Harry sien dit ook: die glimlag is baie anders as hoe hy dit onthou.

"Wel . . . toe ek na Madame Pomfrey gegaan het om hulle te laat krimp, het sy 'n spieël voor my gehou en gesê ek moet haar stop sodra hulle weer nes altyd lyk," sê sy. "En ek het haar net . . . net so 'n bietjie laat aanhou." Sy glimlag nog breër. "My ma en pa sal nie alte in hul skik wees nie. Ek sukkel al eeue dat hulle my moet toelaat om hulle te krimp, maar hulle sê ek moet met my plaatjie aanhou. Hulle is mos tandartse, julle weet, en hulle dink net nie dat tande en towerkuns – kyk! Pigwidgeon is terug!"

Ron se klein uiltjie kwetter wild op die met ys versierde trapreling. Daar is 'n perkamentrol aan sy been vasgemaak. Mense wat verby hom stap, wys en lag en 'n paar derdejaarmeisies gaan staan en sê, "Oe, kyk daardie ou klein uiltjie! Is hy nie oulik nie?"

"Simpel geveerde klein bog!" sis Ron toe hy die trappe uitstorm en vir Pigwidgeon opraap. "Jy moet jou briewe vir die een aan wie dit ge-adresseer is, bring! Jy moenie hier staan en rondhang en probeer aandag trek nie!"

Pigwidgeon hoe-hoe tevrede. Net sy kop steek bo by Ron se vuus uit. Al die derdejaarmeisies lyk uiters geskok.

"Gee pad!" snou Ron hulle toe terwyl hy die vuus met Pigwidgeon deur die lug swaai sodat Pigwidgeon nog harder en meer in sy skik as tevore hoe-hoe. "Dè – vat hier, Harry," voeg Ron in 'n gedempte stem by toe die derdejaarmeisies ontstig wegskarrel. Harry haal Sirius se brief van Pigwidgeon se been af, steek dit in sy sak en hulle gaan haastig terug na die Griffindortoring om dit te lees.

Almal in die geselskamer is veels te besig om vakansiestoom af te blaas

om te kyk wat enigiemand anders doen. Harry, Ron en Hermien gaan sit eenkant, weg van al die ander, by 'n donker venster wat geleidelik onder sneeu toegepak word, en Harry lees hardop voor:

Liewe Harry,

Geluk met jou sukses met die Horingstert. Wie ook al jou naam in daardie Beker gesit het, kan nie nou alte gelukkig voel nie! Ek wou 'n Pienk-oogvloek voorgestel het omdat drake se oë hul swakste punt is –

“Dis wat Krum gedoen het!” fluister Hermien.

– maar jou manier was beter, ek is beïndruk.

Moet net nie op jou louere rus nie, Harry. Jy't nog net een taak voltooi; wie jou ook al vir die Toernooi ingeskryf het, het nog baie kanse om jou seer te maak. Hou jou oë oop – veral as 'n sekere persoon in die rondte is – en konsentreer daarop om uit die moeilikheid te bly.

Laat hoor gereeld van jou, ek wil nog steeds weet as iets ongewoons gebeur.

Strius

“Hy klink net soos Moodie,” sê Harry saggies terwyl hy die brief weer onder sy kleed indruk. “Voortdurende waaksaamheid!” 'n Mens sou sê dat ek met toe oë deur die lewe gaan, teen mure vasloop . . .”

“Maar hy's reg, Harry,” sê Hermien, “jy moet nog twee take doen. Jy moet regtig weer 'n slag na daardie eier gaan kyk, weet jy, en begin uitwerk wat dit beteken . . .”

“Hermien, hy het eeue!” jak Ron haar af. “Wat van 'n potjie skaak, Harry?”

“Ja, oukei,” sê Harry. Toe hy die uitdrukking op Hermien se gesig sien, sê hy, “Komaan, hoe moet ek miskien konsentreer as dit so raas? Ek sal die eier skaars bo-oor dit alles kan hoor.”

“Ja, dit is seker so,” sug sy terwyl sy gaan sit om na die skaakwedstryd te kyk tot Ron, met behulp van 'n paar roekelose pionne en 'n uiters gewelddadige biskop, dit op opwindende wyse met 'n skaakmat beëindig.

Op Kersoggend skrik Harry baie skielik wakker. Hy wonder nog wat hom so onverwags uit die slaap geruk het, toe hy sy oë oopmaak en iets met baie groot, ronde groen oë uit die donkerte na hom sien staar, so naby dat hulle amper neus aan neus is.

“Dobbi!” gil Harry en skuif so vinnig van die elf af weg dat hy amper uit die bed val. “Moet dit nie *doen* nie!”

“Dobbi is jammer, meneer!” piep Dobbi benoud terwyl hy met sy lang vingers oor sy mond agtertoe spring. “Dobbi wil net vir Harry Potter ge-

seende Kersfees sê en vir hom 'n present gee, meneer! Harry Potter het gesê dat Dobbi partykeer vir hom kan kom kuier, meneer!”

“Dis alles reg,” sê Harry wat nog steeds vinniger as gewoonlik asemhaal terwyl sy hartklop na normaal terugkeer. “Dis net – gee my volgende keer net 'n stampie, Dobbi, oukei, moenie so oor my buk nie . . .”

Harry trek die behangsels om sy hemelbed oop, haal sy bril van sy bedkassie af en sit dit op. Sy kreet het vir Ron, Septimus, Dean en Neville laat wakker skrik. Hulle loer nou almal met swaar ooglede en deurmaak hare deur die openings in hul eie behangsels.

“Het iemand jou aangeval, Harry?” vra Septimus slaperig.

“Nee, dis net Dobbi,” mompel Harry. “Gaan slaap maar weer.”

“Naa . . . presentel!” sê Septimus toe hy die groot stapel aan sy voeten-ent sien. Ron, Dean en Neville besluit ook dat hulle hul presente net sowel kan oopmaak siende dat hulle in elk geval wakker is. Harry draai terug na Dobbi wat nou senuagtig langs sy bed staan en nog steeds bekommerd lyk omdat hy Harry ontstel het. Hy het 'n Kersballetjie aan die lussie boaan sy teemus vasgemaak.

“Kan Dobbi vir Harry Potter sy present gee?” piep hy huiwerig.

“Natuurlik kan jy,” sê Harry. “H'm . . . ek het vir jou ook iets.”

Dit is 'n leuen; hy het niks vir Dobbi gekoop nie, maar hy maak sy trommel gou oop en haal 'n paar besonder knopperige opgerolde sokkies uit. Dit is sy oudste en aakligste paar mosterdgeel sokkies wat vroeër oom Vernon s'n was. Die rede dat hulle so erg vol bulte is, is dat Harry sy Kulklikker al vir meer as 'n jaar daarin bêre. Hy haal die Kulklikker uit en gee die sokkies vir Dobbi met die woorde, “Jammer, ek het vergeet om dit toe te draai . . .”

Dobbi is ontsettend in sy skik.

“Sokkies is Dobbi se beste, beste klere, meneer!” sê hy toe hy sy onpaar sokkies uitpluk en oom Vernon s'n aantrek. “Ek het nou al sewe, meneer . . . maar, meneer . . .” sê hy en sy oë word groot toe hy albei sokkies so hoog opgetrek het dat hulle tot onder by sy kortbroek kom, “hulle het 'n fout in die winkel gemaak, Harry Potter, hulle het vir jou twee van dieselfdes gegee!”

“Ag nee, Harry, hoe kon jy dit mis gekyk het!” sê Ron grinnikend van sy bed af wat nou met geskenkpapier besaai is. “Sê jou wat, Dobbi – hier-so – vat hierdie twee, dan kan jy hulle lekker meng. En hier's jou trui.”

Hy gooi 'n paar pers sokkies wat hy so pas oopgemaak het na Dobbi toe, asook die handgebreide trui wat mev. Weasley gestuur het.

Dobbi lyk heeltemal oorweldig. “Meneer is baie vriendelik!” piep hy en toe hy diep voor Ron buig, swem sy oë in trane. “Dobbi het geweet dat meneer 'n groot towenaar moet wees omdat hy Harry Potter se beste vriend is, maar Dobbi het nie geweet dat hy ook grootmoedig en edel en onselfsugtig is nie –”

“Dis net sokkies,” sê Ron wat effens pienk om die ore begin word, hoewel hy terselfdertyd in sy skik lyk. “Sjoe, Harry –” Hy het Harry se present so pas oopgemaak, ’n Chudley Cannon-hoed. “Cool!” Hy plak dit op sy kop waar dit aaklig met sy haarkleur bots.

Nou gee Dobbi vir Harry ’n klein pakkie waarin – sokkies is.

“Dobbi het hulle self gemaak, meneer!” sê die elf opgetoë. “Hy het die wol self met sy eie geld gekoop, meneer!”

Die linkersokkie is ’n helderrooie en daar is ’n besemstokpatroon op; die regtersokkie is groen en het ’n Snippetpatroon.

“Dis . . . dis regtig . . . wel, dankie, Dobbi!” sê Harry terwyl hy hulle aantrek en Dobbi se oë van voor af van vreugde blink.

“Dobbi moet nou gaan, meneer, ons is al besig met die Kersete in die kombuis!” sê Dobbi terwyl hy haastig by die slaapsaal uitdraf en in die verbygaan vir Ron en die res tot siens waai.

Harry se ander presente is heelwat meer bevredigend as Dobbi se onpaar sokkies – natuurlik met uitsondering van die Dursleys s’n, wat ’n enkele sakdoek is, ’n absolute laagtepunt – Harry reken egter dat hulle nog nie van die Tontongtoffie vergeet het nie. Hermien gee vir Harry ’n boek met die naam *Kwiddiekspanne van Brittanje en Ierland*; Ron, ’n bul-tende sak Misbomme; Sirius, ’n handige sakmes met bybehore wat enige slot kan oopmaak en enige knoop kan loskry; en Hagrid, ’n yslike boks lekkers met al Harry se gunsteling – Bertie Bott se *Allegeurtjiebone*, Sjokoladepaddas, Boebels se Beste Borrelgom en Sissende Frisballe. Daar is natuurlik ook mev. Weasley se gewone pakkie waarin ’n nuwe trui (groen, met ’n prentjie van ’n draak op – al wat Harry kan dink, is dat Charlie vir haar alles oor die Horingstert vertel het) en ’n groot klomp tuisgemaakte Kerspasteitjies is.

Harry en Ron ontmoet Hermien in die geselskamer en daarna gaan hulle saam af vir ontbyt. Hulle bring die grootste deel van die oggend in die Griffindortoring deur waar almal hul presente geniet, en gaan daarna terug na die Groot Saal vir ’n manjifieke middagete wat ten minste ’n honderd kalkoene en Kerspoedings insluit, asook groot stapels towenaarsklappers.

Daardie middag gaan hulle uit op die terrein; die sneeu is onversteur behalwe die diep slote wat Durmstrang en Beauxbatons se studente op pad kasteel toe gemaak het. Hermien verkies om te kyk hoe Harry en die Weasleys ’n sneeubalgeveg hou eerder as om self deel te neem en teen vyfuur sê sy dat sy terug boontoe gaan om vir die bal gereed te maak.

“Wat, het jy drie uur nodig?” vra Ron en kyk ongelowig na haar. Hy betaal duur vir hierdie verslapping in konsentrasie toe George ’n groot sneeubal hard teen die kant van sy kop gooi. “Saam met wie gaan jy?” skree hy agter Hermien aan, maar sy waai net en hardloop met die klip-trappe op kasteel toe.

Omdat die bal 'n feesmaal insluit, is daar nie vandag 'n Kerstee nie, dus laat vaar die res hul sneeugeveg teen sewe-uur toe dit te donker is om behoorlik te mik en gaan terug geselskamer toe. Die Vet Vrou sit in haar raam saam met Violet van onder die trappe en albei lyk ietwat aangeklam. Dose likeursjokolade lê gesaai aan die onderkant van die portret.

“Leëfiggies, dis hy!” giggel sy toe hulle die wagwoord gee en sy vorentoe swaai om hulle in te laat.

Harry, Ron, Septimus en Neville gaan na hul slaapsaal om hul aandklere aan te trek. Hulle lyk almal baie selfbewus, maar nie een so erg soos Ron wat met 'n gewalgde uitdrukking op sy gesig na sy weerkaatsing in die lang spieël in die hoek staar. Niemand kan stry dat sy aandkleed baie meer na 'n rok as na enigiets anders lyk nie. In 'n wanhopige poging om dit meer manlik te laat lyk, het hy 'n Verwyderingstowerspreuk op die valle en mouboordjies toegepas. Dit het redelik goed gewerk; die kant is ten minste nou af, maar dis nie 'n netjiese stukkiewerk nie en die nate lyk nog baie uitgerafel toe hulle ondertoe stap.

“Ek kan nog nie verstaan hoe julle twee die mooiste meisies in ons jaar gekry het nie,” brom Dean.

“Dierlike magnetisme,” sê Ron grimmig terwyl hy nog los drade uit sy mouboordjies trek.

Die geselskamer lyk vreemd, vol mense wat allerhande kleure dra pleks van die gewone swart. Parvati staan en wag vir Harry aan die onderpunt van die trap. Sy lyk inderdaad baie mooi in 'n skokpienk kleed. Daar is goud in haar lang donker hare ingevleg en goue armbande om haar gewrigte. Harry is verlig om te sien dat sy nie giggel nie.

“Jy – h'm – lyk baie mooi,” sê hy ongemaklik.

“Dankie,” sê sy. “Padma sal jou in die Ingangsportaal kry,” sê sy vir Ron.

“Goed,” sê Ron terwyl hy oral rondkyk. “Waar's Hermien?”

Parvati haal haar skouers op. “Sal ons solank gaan, Harry?”

“Oukei,” sê Harry, hoewel hy wens dat hy net daar in die geselskamer kan bly. Fred knipoog vir Harry toe hy op pad na die portretopening verby hom stap.

Die Ingangsportaal is vol studente wat rondmaal en wag dat dit agtuur moet word wanneer die deure voor die Groot Saal sal oopgaan. Die mense wat metgeselle uit ander huise gevra het, druk deur die skare op soek na mekaar. Parvati vind haar suster Padma en bring haar na Harry en Ron toe.

“Hallo,” sê Padma, wat in 'n helderturkoois kleed net so mooi soos Parvati lyk. Dit lyk egter nie asof sy baie in haar skik met Ron as metgesel is nie; haar donker oë rus op die uitgerafelde nek en moue van sy aandkleed terwyl sy hom van kop tot tone bestudeer.

“Hallo,” sê Ron wat nie na haar kyk nie, maar na die skare staar. “O nee . . .”

Hy buig sy knieë effens sodat hy agter Harry kan wegkruip, want Fleur Delacour is besig om verby te stap. Sy lyk treffend in 'n silwergrys kleet en word vergesel van Raweklou se Kwiddiekkaptein, Roger Davies. Toe hulle wegraak, kom Ron orent en staar weer oor die skare se koppe.

“Waar is Hermien?” vra hy weer.

'n Groep Slibberins kom met die trappe op van hul kerkerigeselskamer af. Malfoy loop voor; hy dra 'n aandkleed van swart ferweel met 'n hoë kraag wat hom na Harry se mening soos 'n predikant laat lyk. Pansy Parkinson, in 'n bleekpienk kleet met geweldig baie valletjies, hang aan Malfoy se arm. Krabbe en Goliath dra albei groen en Harry kry lekker toe hy sien dat nie een van hulle 'n metgesel kon kry nie.

Die eikehoutdeure gaan oop en almal draai soontoe om te kyk hoe Durmstrang se studente saam met professor Karkaroff aankom. Krum loop voor, vergesel van 'n mooi meisie in 'n blou kleet wat Harry nie ken nie. Oor hul koppe sien hy dat 'n gedeelte van die grasperk voor die kasteel in 'n soort grot vol feëliggies omskep is – wat beteken dat honderde regtige feetjies in die roosbosse wat daar opgetower is, sit en oor die standbeelde van Vader Krismis en sy takbokke fladder.

Dan roep professor McGonagall se stem, “Kampioene, hierdie kant toe, asseblief!”

Parvati vroetel stralend met haar armbande; sy en Harry sê, “Sien julle nou-nou” vir Ron en Padma en stap dan vorentoe terwyl die geselsende skare opsy staan om hulle deur te laat. Professor McGonagall, wat 'n rooi geruite aandkleed dra en 'n besonder lelike krans van distels om die rand van haar hoed gedraai het, sê hulle moet aan die een kant voor die deure staan en wag tot al die ander binne is. Sodra die ander studente gaan sit het, moet hulle die Groot Saal saam binnegaan. Fleur Delacour en Roger Davies gaan staan naaste aan die deure; Davies lyk so verbaas oor sy geluk om Fleur as metgesel te hê dat hy sy oë nie van haar kan afhou nie. Cedric en Cho staan baie na aan Harry; hy kyk nie na hulle nie sodat hy nie met hulle hoef te praat nie. Sy oë dwaal dus na die meisie wat langs Krum staan. Sy mond val oop.

Dit is Hermien.

Sy lyk egter glad nie soos Hermien nie. Sy het iets met haar hare aanvang; dit is nie meer bosserig nie, maar glad en blink en in 'n elegante knoop agter haar kop vasgedraai. Sy dra 'n aandkleed wat van 'n dromerige maagdeblomblou materiaal gemaak is en sy loop selfs anders – of dalk is dit net omdat daar nie 'n stuk of twintig boeke aan haar skouer hang nie. Sy glimlag ook – weliswaar ietwat senuagtig – en die afname in grootte van haar voortande is nog meer merkbaar as tevore. Harry kan nie verstaan dat hy dit nog nie tevore opgelet het nie.

“Hallo, Harry!” sê sy. “Hallo, Parvati!”

Parvati kyk ongelowig na Hermien. Sy is nie die enigste een nie; toe

die deure voor die Groot Saal oopgaan en Krum se bewonderaarsklub van die biblioteek verbystap, staar hulle vol wrewel na Hermien. Pansy Parkinson gaap haar aan toe sy saam met Malfoy verbystap en selfs hy kan vir 'n verandering nie 'n belediging vind om na haar te slinger nie. Ron, daarenteen, loop verby Hermien sonder om na haar te kyk.

Eers toe almal in die Saal gaan sit het, sê professor McGonagall vir die kampioene en hul metgeselle om twee-twee agter mekaar in te val en haar te volg. Hulle maak so en almal in die Groot Saal klap hande toe hulle inkom en aanstap na 'n groot ronde tafel heel voor in die Saal waar die beoordelaars sit.

Die Saal se mure is versier met skitterende silwer ryp, en honderde sierkranse van maretakke en klimop hang kruis en dwars oor die sterbesaaide swart plafon. Die huistafels het verdwyn; in die plek daarvan staan omtrent 'n honderd kleiner, met lantern verligte, tafels rond, elk met plek vir omtrent twaalf mense.

Harry moet konsentreer om nie oor sy eie voete te val nie. Dit lyk asof Parvati haarself gate uit geniet; sy glimlag stralend vir almal en stuur Harry met soveel mening dat hy soos 'n skouhond voel wat sy passies maak. Hy kry 'n glimp van Ron en Padma toe hulle by die boonste tafel kom. Ron staar met vernoude oë na Hermien toe sy verbystap. Padma lyk nors.

Dompeldorius glimlag tevrede toe die kampioene die hoof tafel bereik, maar Karkaroff se uitdrukking lyk verbasend baie soos Ron s'n toe hy Hermien en Krum sien nader kom. Ludo Bagman, wat vanaand 'n helderspers kleed met groot geel sterre dra, klap net so entoesiasies soos die studente hande en Madame Maxine, wat haar gewone uniform van swart satyn vir 'n vloeiende skepping in ligpers sy verruil het, klap beleef hande. Harry besef skielik dat mnr. Crouch nie daar is nie. Percy Weasley sit in die vyfde sitplek by die tafel.

Toe die kampioene en hul metgeselle die tafel bereik, trek Percy die leë stoel langs hom uit en staar betekenisvol na Harry. Harry vang die wenk en gaan sit langs Percy wat 'n splinternuwe vlootblou aandkleed aan het en uiters selfvoldaan lyk.

“Ek is bevorder,” sê Percy nog voor Harry iets kan vra en sy stemtoon laat klink dit soos 'n aankondiging dat hy tot Absolute Heerser van die Heelal verkies is. “Ek is nou mnr. Crouch se persoonlike assistent en ek verteenwoordig hom vanaand hier.”

“Hoekom het hy nie gekom nie?” vra Harry. Hy is regtig nie lus om die hele aand na 'n lesing oor heksekettelbodems te sit en luister nie.

“Ek is bevrees dat mnr. Crouch nie gesond is nie, glad nie gesond nie. Nie sedert die Wêreldbeker nie. Dis nie verbasend nie – oorwerk. Hy's nie so jonk soos hy was nie – hoewel natuurlik nog steeds briljant, die brein is nog net so aktief soos altyd. Die Wêreldbeker was egter 'n fiasko vir die

hele Ministerie en die wangedrag van daardie huiself van hom, Knypogies, of wat ook al, was vir mnr. Crouch 'n geweldige persoonlike skok. Hy het haar natuurlik onmiddellik daarna ontslaan, maar – wel, soos ek sê, hy word ouer, hy het versorging nodig en ek dink dis net nie meer so gemaklik by die huis sedert sy weg is nie. Toe moet ons nog die Toernooi ook reël en die onreëlmatighede van die Wêreldbeker hanteer – daardie afstootlike Skinner-vroumens wat haar neus oral insteek – nee, die arme man, hy geniet 'n welverdiende, stil Kersfees. Ek is net bly dat hy weet dat daar iemand is op wie hy kan staatmaak wat sy plek kan vol staan.”

Harry is baie lus om te vra of mnr. Crouch nog steeds vir Percy “Weatherby” noem, maar hy weerstaan die versoeking.

Daar is nog geen kos op die skitterende goue borde nie, maar voor elkeen van hulle lê 'n klein spyskaart. Harry tel syne onseker op en kyk om hom rond – daar is geen kelners nie. Dompeldorius bestudeer sy spyskaart egter sorgvuldig en sê dan hard en duidelik vir sy bord, “Varktjops!”

Die varktjops verskyn. Die res van die tafel snap wat aangaan en plaas ook hul bestellings by hul borde. Harry kyk op na Hermien om te sien hoe sy oor hierdie nuwe en meer ingewikkelde manier van eet voel – dit moet vir seker baie ekstra werk vir die huiselwe beteken – maar dit lyk asof Hermien vir 'n verandering nie aan S.P.O.E.G. dink nie. Sy is in 'n diep gesprek met Viktor Krum gewikkel en dit lyk asof sy skaars besef wat sy eet.

Dit tref Harry nou eers dat hy Krum nog nooit tevore hoor praat het nie, maar hy praat beslis op die oomblik baie entoesiasies.

“Vhel, ons het ook 'n kasteel, maar nie so groot soos hierdie een nie en ook nie so gerieflik nie, dink ek,” sê hy vir Hermien. “Ons het net vier verdiepings en die vure word net vir magiese geleenthede aangesteek. Ons terrein is vheel groter as hierdies – hoevhel in die vhlinter het ons maar min daglig, dus kan ons dit nie juis geniet nie. Maar in die somer vlieg ons elke dag oor die mere en oor die berge –”

“Komaan, Krum, komaan!” sê Karkaroff met 'n laggie wat nie sy koue oë bereik nie. “Moenie alles staan en weggee nie of jou sjarmante vriendin sal weet waar om ons te vind!”

Dompeldorius glimlag sodat sy oë skitter. “Igor, al hierdie geheimsinnigheid . . . 'n mens sou dink dat jy nie besoekers wil hê nie.”

“Wel, Dompeldorius,” sê Karkaroff en hy stal sy vergeelde tande uit vir almal om te sien, “ons beskerm maar almal ons privaatheid, of hoe? Moet ons nie almal die setel van geleerdheid wat aan ons toevertrou is veilig hou nie? Is ons nie met reg trots daarop dat net ons ons skole se geheime ken nie, en is dit nie goed en reg om daardie geheime te beskerm nie?” “O, ek sal nie daarvan droom om te dink dat ek al Hogwarts se geheime ken nie, Igor,” sê Dompeldorius vriendelik. “Om die waarheid te sê, ek het net vanoggend 'n verkeerde draai gemaak en myself in 'n pragtige

huim vertrek wat ek nog nooit tevore gesien het nie, bevind. Daar was 'n besonder manjifieke versameling kamerpote in. Toe ek egter wou teruggaan om dit deeglik te bekyk, het die vertrek verdwyn. Ek moet op die uitkyk bly daarvoor. Dalk kan 'n mens net om halfses in die oggend toegang daartoe kry. Of dalk verskyn dit net as die maan kwart vol is – of as die soeker 'n besonder vol blaas het.”

Harry snorklag in sy bord vol ghoelasj. Percy frons, maar Harry kan sweer dat Dompeldorius skelmpies vir hom geknippoog het.

Fleur Delacour is intussen besig om Hogwarts se versierings teenoor Roger Davies te kritiseer.

“Dit is niks nie,” sê Fleur afwysend terwyl sy na die Groot Saal se sprankelende mure kyk. “By die Beauxbatons-paleis het ons Kerstyd ysbeeldhouwerke reg rondom die eetkamer. Hulle smelt natuurlik nie . . . hulle is soos enorme standbeelde wat oral glinster. En die kos is eenvoudig wonderlik. En ons het kore van bosnimfe wat ons toesing terwyl ons eet. En ons het niks van hierdie liederlike wapenrustings in die sale nie en as 'n poltergeist dit sou waag om by Beauxbatons in te kom, sal hy *net* so uitgeskop word.” Sy slaan ongeduldig met haar hand op die tafel.

Die hele tyd dat sy praat, staar Roger Davies met 'n verdwaasde uitdrukking op sy gesig na haar en hy steek sy mond aanmekaar met sy vurk mis. Harry kry die indruk dat Davies so besig is om vir Fleur aan te gaap dat hy regtig niks hoor wat sy sê nie.

“Absoluut reg,” sê hy vinnig en slaan ook met sy hand op die tafel net soos Fleur gemaak het. “*Net* so. H'm.”

Harry kyk in die Saal rond. Hagrid sit by een van die ander persooneltafels; hy het weer sy aaklige harige bruin pak aan en hy staar na die hoof tafel. Harry sien hoe hy effens waai en toe hy omkyk, sien hy hoe Madame Maxine terugwuiw sodat haar opale in die kerslig glinster.

Hermien leer nou vir Krum om haar naam en van behoorlik uit te spreek; hy hou aan om Hermien le Gwaanshie te sê.

“Hermien le Gran – sie,” sê sy stadig en duidelik.

“Hermien le Gwan – sie.”

“Na genoeg,” sê sy toe sy Harry se oog vang en vir hom grinnik.

Toe al die kos opgeëet is, staan Dompeldorius op en vra die studente om ook op te staan. Toe, met 'n wuif van sy towerstaf, skuif die tafels tot teen die mure sodat die vloer leeg is. Aan die regterkant van die muur tower hy 'n geligte platform op. 'n Stel dromme, etlike kitare, 'n luit, 'n tjello en 'n paar doedelsakke word daarop opgestel.

Die Skikgodinne verskyn hierna onder wilde en begeesterde toejuing op die verhoog; hulle is almal verskriklik harig en dra swart klede wat op kunstige wyse geskeur is. Hulle tel hul instrumente op en Harry, wat met soveel belangstelling na hulle staar dat hy amper vergeet het wat op hom wag, besef skielik dat die lanterns op al die ander tafels uitgegaan

het en dat die ander kampioene en hul metgeselle besig is om op te staan.

“Staan op!” sis Parvati. “Ons is veronderstel om te gaan dans!”

Toe hy opstaan, struikel Harry oor sy aandkleed. Die Skikgodinne speel ’n stadige, melancholiese deuntjie; Harry stap na die helder verligte dansvloer terwyl hy sy bes doen om niemand se oog te vang nie (hy kan sien hoe Septimus en Dean giggelend vir hom waai), maar die volgende oomblik gryp Parvati sy hande en plant een op haar middel terwyl sy die ander een styf in een van haar hande vashou.

Dit is nie so erg soos wat hy ver wag het nie, dink Harry terwyl hy stadig op die plek in die rondte draai (terwyl Parvati stuur). Hy hou sy oë vasgenaël bo die koppe van die mense wat toekyk en sommer gou kom baie van hulle ook dans sodat die kampioene nie meer die middelpunt van die belangstelling is nie. Neville en Ginny dans naby hulle – hy sien hoe Ginny se gesig vertrek elke keer dat Neville op haar tone trap – en Dompeldorius wals met Madame Maxine. Hy is so verdwerg deur haar dat die bokant van sy gepunte hoed haar skaars onder die ken kielie; sy beweeg egter met baie grasia vir so ’n groot vrou. Maloog Moodie doen ’n uiters onelegante tweestapdansie met professor Sinistra, wat senuagtig probeer om sy houtbeen te vermy.

“Oulike sokkies, Potter,” grom Moodie in die verbygaan terwyl sy magiese oog deur Harry se kleed kyk.

“O – ja, Dobbi die huiself het dit vir my gebrei,” sê Harry met ’n grinnik.

“Hy is so grillerig!” fluister Parvati toe Moodie wegklonk. “Ek dink nie daardie oog moet toegelaat wees nie!”

Harry is verlig toe hy die laaste bewende noot van die doedelsak hoor. Die Skikgodinne hou op speel, applous vul die Saal opnuut en Harry laat Parvati onmiddellik los. “Kom ons gaan sit, oukei?”

“O – maar – hierdie een is regtig goed!” sê Parvati toe die Skikgodinne ’n nuwe lied wat baie vinniger is, begin speel.

“Nee, ek hou nie daarvan nie,” lieg Harry terwyl hy haar van die dansvloer af lei, verby Fred en Angelina wat so baldadig dans dat die mense om hulle uit vrees vir beserings, eenkant toe padgee. Hulle stap na die tafel waar Ron en Padma nog sit.

“Hoe’s dinge?” vra Harry vir Ron toe hy gaan sit en ’n bottel Botterbier oopmaak.

Ron antwoord nie. Hy gluur na Hermien en Krum wat nou naby hulle dans. Padma sit met haar arms en bene gekruis terwyl een voet op die maat van die musiek wikkkel. Elke nou en dan kyk sy vol wrewel na Ron, wat hom glad nie aan haar steur nie. Parvati gaan sit aan die ander kant van Harry en kruis ook haar arms en bene. ’n Paar oomblikke later vra ’n seun van Beauxbatons haar om te dans.

“Jy gee nie om nie, nè, Harry?” sê Parvati.

“Wat?” sê Harry wat nou vir Cho en Cedric dophou.

“O, niks,” snou Parvati toe sy saam met die Beauxbatons-seun weg-stap. Toe die musiek ophou, kom sy nie terug nie.

Hermien kom nader en gaan sit op Parvati se lêë stoel. Sy is ’n bietjie pienk in die gesig na die dans.

“Hallo,” sê Harry. Ron sê niks.

“Dis warm, nè?” sê Hermien terwyl sy haarself met haar hand koel waai. “Viktor het gou iets gaan haal om te drink.”

Ron kyk vernietigend na haar.

“Viktor?” sê hy. “Het hy jou dan nog nie gevra om hom Vicky te noem nie?”

Hermien kyk verbaas op.

“Wat gaan met jou aan?” vra sy.

“As jy nie weet nie,” sê Ron snydend, “gaan ek ook nie vir jou sê nie.”

Hermien gaap hom aan en kyk dan na Harry, wat sy skouers ophaal.

“Ron, wat –?”

“Hy’s van Durmstrang!” spoeg Ron. “Hy kompeteer teen Harry! Teen Hogwarts! Jy – jy –” Ron soek duidelik na woorde wat sterk genoeg is om Hermien se misdaad te beskryf, “*Jy heul met die vyand, dis wat!*”

Hermien se mond val oop.

“Moet tog nie so simpel wees nie!” sê sy na ’n rukkie. “Die vyand! Regtig – wie was so opgewonde toe hy hom hierheen sien kom het? Wie wil nog die hele tyd sy handtekening loop vra? Wie het ’n model van hom in sy slaapsaal?”

Ron verkies om dit te ignoreer. “Hy’t jou seker gevra om saam met hom te kom toe julle saam in die biblioteek was?” sê hy.

“Ja, hy het,” sê Hermien en die pienk vlekke op haar wange gloei nog helderder. “En wat daarvan?”

“Wat het gebeur – het jy hom vir *spoeg* probeer werf, hè?”

“Nee, ek het nie! As jy dan *regtig* moet weet, hy – hy’t gesê hy kom nog elke dag biblioteek toe om met my te probeer praat, dis net dat hy nie die moed kon bymekaarskraap nie!”

Hermien sê dit baie vinnig en bloos so rooi dat sy amper dieselfde kleur as Parvati se kled is.

“Ja, wel – dit is sy storie,” sê Ron geniepsig.

“En wat beteken dit miskien?”

“Dis tog duidelik, is dit nie? Hy’s Karkaroff se student, dan nie? Hy weet wie altyd saam met jou rondhang . . . hy probeer by Harry uitkom – inligting uit die binneste kring kry – of na genoeg kom om ’n vloek op hom te sit –”

Hermien lyk asof Ron haar geklap het. Toe sy praat, bewee haar stem. “Vir jou inligting, hy het my nog nie *een enkele ding* oor Harry gevra nie, nie een nie –”

Dis teen die spoed van lig dat Ron van aanslag verander. “Dan hoop hy dat jy hom sal help om uit te vind wat sy eier beteken! Julle het seker klaar koppe bymekaargesit daar in die biblioteek –”

“Ek sal hom *nooit* met daardie eier help nie!” sê Hermien en sy lyk verontwaardig. “*Nooit*. Hoe durf jy so iets sê – ek wil hê Harry moet die Toernooi wen. Harry weet dit, nè, Harry?”

“Jy’t ’n snaakse manier om dit te wys,” sê Ron snydend.

“Hierdie hele Toernooi is veronderstel om ons te leer om vreemde toewenaars te leer ken en vriende met hulle te maak!” sê Hermien skril.

“Nee, dit is nie!” skree Ron. “Dit gaan oor wen!”

Nou begin mense na hulle staar.

“Ron,” sê Harry sag, “ek gee nie om dat Hermien saam met Krum gekom het nie –”

Maar Ron ignoreer Harry ook.

“Hoekom gaan soek jy nie vir Vicky nie, hy wonder seker waar jy is,” sê hy.

“*Moenie vir hom Vicky sê nie!*” Hermien spring op, storm oor die dansvloer en verdwyn tussen die mense.

Dis met ’n uitdrukking van woede gemeng met bevrediging dat Ron haar agterna kyk.

“Gaan jy my nooit vra om te dans nie?” vra Padma vir hom.

“Nee,” sê Ron wat nog steeds agter Hermien aan staar.

“Goed,” snou Padma hom toe en sy staan ook op om by Parvati en die Beauxbatons-seun aan te sluit wat een van sy vriende so vinnig optower dat Harry kan sweer hy het ’n Ontbiedtowerspreuk gebruik.

“Vhaar is Hermien?” sê ’n stem.

Krum het so pas met twee Botterbiere in sy hande by hul tafel aangekom.

“Nie ’n idee nie,” sê Ron koppig toe hy na hom kyk. “Het jy haar verloor, hè?”

Krum lyk weer nors.

“Vhel, as julle haar sien, sê vir haar ek het drankies gekry,” sê hy toe hy wegslof.

“Vriende met Viktor Krum gemaak, hè, Ron?”

Percy kom nader. Hy vryf sy hande teen mekaar en lyk besonder grootdoenerig. “Uitstekend! Dis die hele punt, weet jy – internasionale magiese samewerking!”

Tot Harry se ergernis gaan sit Percy onmiddellik op Padma se leë stoel. Die hoof tafel is nou leeg; professor Dompeldorius dans met professor Spruit, Ludo Bagman met professor McGonagall, Madame Maxine en Hagrid maak ’n breë pad oor die dansvloer toe hulle deur die studente wals en Karkaroff is nêrens te sien nie. Toe die volgende nommer eindig, klap almal hande en Harry sien hoe Ludo Bagman professor McGonagall

se hand soen en toe deur die skare koers kies tot waar hy deur Fred en George trompop geloop word.

“Wat dink hulle doen hulle, om senior lede van die Ministerie te loop en pla?” sis Percy terwyl hy agterdogtig na Fred en George staar. “Geen respek nie . . .”

Ludo Bagman skud Fred en George redelik gou af en toe hy vir Harry sien, wuif hy en kom na hul tafel toe aangestap.

“Ek hoop nie my broers is besig om u lastig te val nie, mnr. Bagman?” se Percy dadelik.

“Wat? O, nee, glad nie, glad nie!” sê Bagman. “Nee, hulle het net vir my nog ’n paar dinge oor daardie kultowerstawwe van hulle vertel. Gewonder of ek hulle kan raad gee oor die bemarking daarvan. Ek het belowe dat ek hulle aan ’n paar kontakte van my by Zonko se Grapwinkel sal voorstel . . .”

Percy lyk glad nie tevrede hiermee nie en Harry kan wed dat hy mev. Weasley dadelik sal vertel die oomblik dat hy by die huis kom. Dit lyk asof Fred en George se planne die laaste tyd al meer ambisieus word, asof hulle reken dat hulle aan die publiek sal kan verkoop.

Bagman maak sy mond oop om vir Harry iets te vra, maar Percy spring hom voor. “Hoe voel u oor die verloop van die Toernooi, mnr. Bagman? Ons departement is heeltemal tevrede – die haakplek met die Beker Vol Vuur” – hy loer na Harry – “was natuurlik ’n bietjie ongelukkig, maar dit lyk asof alles sedertdien glad verloop, of wat dink u?”

“O, ja,” sê Bagman vrolik, “dis enorme pret. Hoe gaan dit met ou Bart? Jammer dat hy nie hier kon wees nie.”

“O, ek is seker mnr. Crouch sal binnekort weer op die been wees,” sê Percy gewigtig, “maar intussen is ek meer as gewillig om vir hom in te staan. Dit is natuurlik nie net danse bywoon nie –” hy lag lugtig – “o nee, ek moes allerhande dinge wat tydens sy afwesigheid opgekom het, hanteer. U het seker gehoor dat Ali Bashir gevang is toe hy ’n besending vlieënde tapyte die land in wou smokkel? Dan het ons ook probeer om die Transsilvaniërs te oorreed om die Internasionale Verbod op Tweegevegte te onderteken, ek het juis volgende jaar ’n vergadering met hul Hoof van Magiese Samewerking –”

“Kom ons gaan stap,” mompel Ron vir Harry, “om van Percy af weg te kom . . .”

Harry en Ron verlaat die tafel onder die voorwendsel dat hulle iets te drinke wil kry, stap om die dansvloer en glip uit na die Ingangsportaal. Die voordeure staan oop en die fladderende feëliggies in die roostuin wink en flikker toe hulle met die trappe afstap tot waar hulle deur struik, kronkelende ornamentele paadjies en groot klipstandbeelde omring is. Harry hoor die geplas van water. Dit klink soos ’n fontein. Mense sit hier en daar op die gesnede tuinbanke. Hy en Ron stap met een van die

kronkelende paadjies tussen die roosbome deur. Hulle het nog net 'n kort entjie gevorder toe hulle 'n onaangename en bekende stem hoor.

“... ek kan regtig nie insien waarom jy so 'n bohaai maak nie, Igor.”

“Severus, jy kan nie wil voorgee dat dit nie aan die gebeur is nie!”

Karkaroff se stem klink angstig en gesmoord asof hy probeer seker maak dat hy nie afgeluister kan word nie. “Dis al maande dat dit al duideliker en duideliker word, ek is uiters bekommerd, ek kan dit nie ontken nie –” “Gee dan pad,” sê Snerp se stem kortaf. “Vlug, ek sal vir jou verskoning maak. Ek bly egter net hier by Hogwarts.”

Snerp en Karkaroff kom om die draai. Daar is 'n uiters onaangename trek op Snerp se gesig, sy towerstaf is gereed en hy is besig om roosbome uit die pad te blaas. Van onder sommige van die bosse klink krete op en donker vorms storm daaruit.

“Tien punte af van Hoesenproes, Fawcett!” snou Snerp toe 'n meisie verby hom hardloop. “En tien punte af van Raweklou, Stebbins!” toe 'n seun agter haar aan hardloop. “En wat maak julle twee hier?” voeg hy by toe hy Harry en Ron voor hom in die paadjie sien. Karkaroff, merk Harry, lyk ietwat ongemaklik toe hy hulle daar sien staan. Sy hand beweeg senuagtig na sy bokbaardjie en hy begin om dit om sy vinger te draai.

“Ons loop,” sê Ron kortaf vir Snerp. “Dis darem seker nie teen die wet nie, of hoe?”

“Hou dan aan met loop!” snou Snerp toe hy verby hulle skuur sodat sy lang swart kleed bol staan agter hom. Karkaroff haas hom agter Snerp aan. Harry en Ron stap met die paadjie aan.

“Wat vreet vir Karkaroff?” brom Ron.

“En van wanneer af noem hy en Snerp mekaar op hul voorname?” sê Harry stadig.

Hulle het 'n groot kliptakbok bereik van waar hulle vonkelende strale water wat van 'n hoë spuitfontein af kom, kan sien. Die skaduagtige buitelyne van twee enorme mense wat in die maanlig op 'n klipbank sit en na die water kyk, is ook sigbaar. Dan hoor Harry vir Hagrid praat.

“Oomblik toe ek jou gesien het, het ek geweet,” sê hy in 'n vreemde, skor stem.

Harry en Ron vries. Dit klink nie eintlik na die soort toneel waarop hulle behoort af te kom nie... Harry kyk af in die paadjie en sien vir Fleur Delacour en Roger Davies wat half weggesteek in 'n roosbos daar naby staan. Hy tik Ron op die skouer en beduie met sy kop na hulle, met die bedoeling dat hulle ongemerk daarlangs kan wegglip (sowel Fleur as Davies lyk vir Harry besonder besig) maar Ron, wie se oë wyd gerek het van skok toe hy Fleur sien, skud sy kop woes en trek Harry dieper onder die skaduwees agter die takbok in.

“Wat het jy geweet, 'Agrid?” spin Madame Maxine in haar lae stem.

Harry wil beslis nie hierna luister nie; hy weet dat Hagrid dit sal haat

om onder sulke omstandighede afgeluister te word (hy sal beslis ook) – as dit moontlik was, het hy sy vingers in sy ore gestee en hardop ge-
neurie, maar dit kan hy nie doen nie. Hy probeer om vol belangstelling na 'n kwer te kyk wat op die kliptakbok se rug loop, maar die kwer is
nie so interessant dat hy Hagrid se volgende woorde kan ignoreer nie.

“Ek het net geweet . . . geweet dat jy soos ek is . . . was dit jou ma of
jou pa?”

“Ek – ek weet nie wat jy bedoel nie, 'Agrid . . .”

“Dit was my ma,” sê Hagrid sag. “Sy was een van die laastes in Brit-
tanje. Kan haar 'tuurlik nie goed onthou nie . . . sy't weggeloop, sien. Toe
ek omtrent drie was. Sy was nie juis die moederlike tipe nie. Wel . . . dis
nie in hul aard nie, nè? Weet nie wat van haar geword het nie . . . kan
dood wees vir al wat ek weet . . .”

Madame Maxine sê nie 'n woord nie. Teen sy beterwete neem Harry sy
oë van die kwer af weg en loer oor die takbok se horings terwyl hy luis-
ter . . . hy het Hagrid nog nooit oor sy kinderjare hoor praat nie.

“My pa se hart het gebreek toe sy geloop het. Klein ou mannetjie, my
pa. Teen die tyd dat ek ses was, kon ek hom ophig en op die kombuiskas
neersit as hy my kwaad maak. Het hom laat lag . . .” Hagrid se diep stem
breek. Madame Maxine sit bewegingloos en luister terwyl sy oënskynlik
na die silwer fontein staar. “Pa het my grootgemaak . . . maar hy's dood
net na ek skool toe is. Moes daarna so half my eie ding doen. Dompel-
dorus het my baie gehelp. Was baie goed vir my, hy was . . .”

Hagrid haal 'n groot kolletjies-sysakdoek uit en blaas sy neus met
mening. “So . . . in elk geval . . . genoeg oor my. Wat van jou? Van wat-
ter kant af het jy dit gekry?”

Madame Maxine staan egter onverwags op.

“Dit is koud,” sê sy – maar die lug is nie naastenby so koud soos haar
stem nie. “Ek dink ek moet liever ingaan.”

“H'm?” sê Hagrid beteuterd. “Nee, moenie gaan nie! Ek – ek het nog
nooit tevore een van ons raakgeloop nie!”

“Een van wat, bedoel jy presies?” sê Madame Maxine en haar stem-
toon is yskoud.

As hy kon, sou Harry vir Hagrid gesê het om liever sy mond te hou;
hy staan daar in die skaduwees en kners op sy tande terwyl hy teen sy
beterwete hoop dat Hagrid nie – maar dit help nie.

“'n Halfreus, natuurlik!” sê Hagrid.

“Oe, hoe durf jy!” gil Madame Maxine. Haar stem skeur soos 'n mis-
horing deur die vreedsame naglug; agter hom hoor Harry hoe Fleur en
Roger uit hul roosboom val. “In my lewe was ek nog nooit so beledig nie!
Halfreus? Moi? Ek is – ek is net groot gebou!”

Toe sy wegstorm en die struik in haar woede uit die pad druk, styg
groot veelkleurige swerms feetjies die lug in op. Hagrid sit nog steeds op

die tuinbank en kyk haar agterna. Dit is te donker om die uitdrukking op sy gesig te sien. Toe, omtrent 'n minuut later, staan hy op en stap weg, nie terug kasteel toe nie, maar oor die donker terrein na sy hut.

“Komaan,” sê Harry gedemp vir Ron. “Kom ons loop . . .”

Ron beweeg egter nie.

“Wat's fout?” vra Harry en staar na hom.

Toe Ron na Harry kyk, is daar 'n baie ernstige uitdrukking op sy gesig.

“Het jy geweet,” fluister hy, “dat Hagrid 'n halfreus is?”

“Nee,” sê Harry, “en wat daarvan?”

Aan die kyk wat Ron hom gee, kan hy dadelik sien dat hy sy onkunde oor die towerwêreld weer eens laat blyk het. Omdat hy by die Dursleys grootgeword het, is daar baie dinge wat towenaars as vanselfsprekend aanvaar wat vir Harry 'n openbaring is, hoewel hierdie verrassings al minder word hoe verder hy op skool vorder. Hy besef nou dat die meeste towenaars nie “en wat daarvan?” sal sê as hulle moet uitvind dat een van hul vriende 'n reus vir 'n ma gehad het nie.

“Ek sal daar binne verduidelik,” sê Ron sag. “Kom . . .”

Fleur en Roger Davies het verdwyn, waarskynlik na 'n klomp struik wat meer beskut is. Harry en Ron gaan terug na die Groot Saal. Parvati en Padma sit nou saam met 'n hele groep Beauxbatons-seuns by 'n tafel ver van hulle af en Hermien dans met Krum. Harry en Ron gaan sit by 'n tafel wat ver van die dansvloer af is.

“Wel?” por Harry vir Ron aan. “En wat is die probleem met reuse nogal?”

“Wel, hulle is . . . hulle is . . .” Ron soek na woorde, “'n bietjie on-aardig,” eindig hy lamlendig.

“Wat maak dit miskien saak?” sê Harry. “Daar's niks met Hagrid ver-keerd nie!”

“Ek weet daar is nie, maar . . . dis verbrands nie snaaks dat hy eerder stilbly daaroor nie,” sê Ron kopskuddend. “Ek het nog altyd gedink dat hy met 'n Opsweltowerspreuk deurmekaar was toe hy 'n kind was. Wou liewer nie daaroor praat nie . . .”

“Wat maak dit saak as sy ma 'n reus was?” sê Harry weer.

“Wel . . . niemand wat hom ken, sal omgee nie, want almal weet dat hy nie gevaarlik is nie,” sê Ron stadig. “Maar . . . Harry, hulle is geweldenaars, reuse. Dis soos Hagrid daar gesê het, dis in hul aard, hulle is soos trolle . . . hulle hou daarvan om dood te maak, almal weet dit. Daar is egter nie meer van hulle in Brittanje oor nie.”

“Wat het van hulle geword?”

“Wel, hulle was in elk geval besig om uit te sterf en toe's 'n klomp van hulle nog deur Aurors ook doodgemaak. Daar is glo nog reuse oorsee . . . kruip meesal iewers in die berge weg . . .”

“Ek weet nie vir wie Maxine dink sy bluf nie,” sê Harry terwyl hy na

Madame Maxine kyk waar sy alleen by die beoordelaarstafel sit en baie somber lyk. “As Hagrid ’n halfreus is, is sy beslis ook. Groot gebou . . . al wat groter bene as sy het, is ’n dinosaurus.”

Die res van die bal sit Harry en Ron in die hoek oor reuse en praat. Nie een van die twee is hoegenaamd lus om te dans nie. Harry probeer om nie na Cho en Cedric te kyk nie; hulle maak hom baie lus om iets te skop.

Toe die Skikgodinne om middernag klaar gespeel het, juig almal hulle vir oulaas luidkeels toe en begin dan aanstap Ingangsportaal toe. Baie van die mense het gewens die bal moet nog langer aanhou, maar Harry is heeltemal tevrede om bed toe te gaan; wat hom betref, was dit nie juis ’n genotvolle aand nie.

Buite in die Ingangsportaal sien Harry en Ron hoe Hermien vir Krumnagsê voor hy na Durmstrang se skip toe teruggaan. Sy kyk Ron baie koud aan en loop sonder ’n woord verby hom met die marmertappe op boontoe. Harry en Ron stap agterna, maar halfpad met die trappe op hoor Harry hoe iemand hom roep.

“Haai – Harry!”

Dit is Cedric Diggory. Harry let op dat Cho onder in die Ingangsportaal vir hom staan en wag.

“Ja?” sê Harry koud toe Cedric die trappe na hom toe uithardloop.

Dit lyk asof Cedric dit wat hy te sê het nie voor Ron wil sê nie. Ron lyk omgekrap toe hy sy skouers ophaal en verder stap.

“Luister . . .” Cedric se stem sak toe Ron verdwyn. “Ek skuld jou oor jy vir my van die drake gesê het. Jy weet, daardie goue eier? Skree joune ook so as jy dit oopmaak?”

“Ja,” sê Harry.

“Wel . . . neem ’n bad, oukei?”

“Ekskuus?”

“Neem ’n bad en – h’m – vat die eier saam met jou en – h’m – dan dink jy so ’n bietjie oor alles daar in die warm water. Dit sal jou help om te dink . . . glo my.”

Harry gaap hom aan.

“Sê jou wat,” sê Cedric, “gebruik die prefekte se badkamer. Vierde deur aan die linkerkant van daardie standbeeld van Boris die Verskrikte op die vyfde verdieping. Wagwoord is *dennevars*. Moet loop . . . moet gaan nagsê –”

Hy glimlag weer vir Harry en storm dan haastig by die trappe af na waar Cho vir hom staan en wag.

Harry stap alleen terug na die Griffindortoring. Dit was uiters eienaardige raad. Hoe kan ’n bad hom help om uit te werk wat die skreeuende eier beteken? Is Cedric besig om met hom die draak te steek? Wil hy Harry soos ’n bobbejaan laat lyk sodat Cho meer van hom wat Cedric is sal hou?

Die Vet Vrou en haar vriendin Vi sit in die prent voor die portretopening en slaap. Harry moet hard "Feëliggies!" skree voor hulle wakker word en toe is hulle uiters omgekrap. Hy klim by die geselskamer in waar Ron en Hermien 'n verskriklike uitval het. Hulle staan drie meter uitmekaar met rooi gesigte op mekaar en skree.

"Wel, as jy nie daarvan hou nie, dan weet jy seker nou wat die oplossing is, nè?" gil Hermien; haar hare het losgekom uit die elegante bolla en haar gesig is vertrek van woede.

"O ja?" gil Ron terug. "En wat miskien?"

"Vra my volgende keer as daar 'n bal is vóór iemand anders dit doen en nie as 'n laaste uitweg nie, oukei!"

Toe Hermien op haar hak omdraai en met die meisies se trappe slaapsaal toe storm, gaan Ron se mond soos 'n goudvis s'n oop en toe. Ron draai om en kyk na Harry.

"Wel," sputter hy en lyk oorbluf, "wel – dit wys jou net – snap glad nie waarom dit gaan nie –"

Harry sê niks. Dis vir hom te lekker om weer op goeie voet met Ron te wees om juis nou vir hom te sê wat hy dink – maar hy het 'n idee dat Hermien baie beter as Ron gesnap het waarom dit eintlik gaan.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



RITA SKEETER'S SCOOP

Everybody got up late on Boxing Day. The Gryffindor common room was much quieter than it had been lately, many yawns punctuating the lazy conversations. Hermione's hair was bushy again; she confessed to Harry that she had used liberal amounts of Sleekeazy's Hair Potion on it for the ball, "but it's way too much bother to do every day," she said matter-of-factly, scratching a purring Crookshanks behind the ears.

Ron and Hermione seemed to have reached an unspoken agreement not to discuss their argument. They were being quite friendly to each other, though oddly formal. Ron and Harry wasted no time in telling Hermione about the conversation they had overheard between Madame Maxime and Hagrid, but Hermione didn't seem to find the news that Hagrid was a half-giant nearly as shocking as Ron did.

“Well, I thought he must be,” she said, shrugging. “I knew he couldn’t be pure giant because they’re about twenty feet tall. But honestly, all this hysteria about giants. They can’t *all* be horrible. . . . It’s the same sort of prejudice that people have toward werewolves. . . . It’s just bigotry, isn’t it?”

Ron looked as though he would have liked to reply scathingly, but perhaps he didn’t want another row, because he contented himself with shaking his head disbelievingly while Hermione wasn’t looking.

It was time now to think of the homework they had neglected during the first week of the holidays. Everybody seemed to be feeling rather flat now that Christmas was over — everybody except Harry, that is, who was starting (once again) to feel slightly nervous.

The trouble was that February the twenty-fourth looked a lot closer from this side of Christmas, and he still hadn’t done anything about working out the clue inside the golden egg. He therefore started taking the egg out of his trunk every time he went up to the dormitory, opening it, and listening intently, hoping that this time it would make some sense. He strained to think what the sound reminded him of, apart from thirty musical saws, but he had never heard anything else like it. He closed the egg, shook it vigorously, and opened it again to see if the sound had changed, but it hadn’t. He tried asking the egg questions, shouting over all the wailing, but nothing happened. He even threw the egg across the room — though he hadn’t really expected that to help.

Harry had not forgotten the hint that Cedric had given him, but his less-than-friendly feelings toward Cedric just now meant that he was keen not to take his help if he could avoid it. In any case, it seemed to

him that if Cedric had really wanted to give Harry a hand, he would have been a lot more explicit. He, Harry, had told Cedric exactly what was coming in the first task — and Cedric's idea of a fair exchange had been to tell Harry to take a bath. Well, he didn't need that sort of rubbishy help — not from someone who kept walking down corridors hand in hand with Cho, anyway. And so the first day of the new term arrived, and Harry set off to lessons, weighed down with books, parchment, and quills as usual, but also with the lurking worry of the egg heavy in his stomach, as though he were carrying that around with him too.

Snow was still thick upon the grounds, and the greenhouse windows were covered in condensation so thick that they couldn't see out of them in Herbology. Nobody was looking forward to Care of Magical Creatures much in this weather, though as Ron said, the skrewts would probably warm them up nicely, either by chasing them, or blasting off so forcefully that Hagrid's cabin would catch fire.

When they arrived at Hagrid's cabin, however, they found an elderly witch with closely cropped gray hair and a very prominent chin standing before his front door.

"Hurry up, now, the bell rang five minutes ago," she barked at them as they struggled toward her through the snow.

"Who're you?" said Ron, staring at her. "Where's Hagrid?"

"My name is Professor Grubbly-Plank," she said briskly. "I am your temporary Care of Magical Creatures teacher."

"Where's Hagrid?" Harry repeated loudly.

"He is indisposed," said Professor Grubbly-Plank shortly.

Soft and unpleasant laughter reached Harry's ears. He turned; Draco Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherins were joining the class. All of them looked gleeful, and none of them looked surprised to see Professor Grubbly-Plank.

"This way, please," said Professor Grubbly-Plank, and she strode off around the paddock where the Beauxbatons horses were shivering. Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed her, looking back over their shoulders at Hagrid's cabin. All the curtains were closed. Was Hagrid in there, alone and ill?

"What's wrong with Hagrid?" Harry said, hurrying to catch up with Professor Grubbly-Plank.

"Never you mind," she said as though she thought he was being nosy.

"I do mind, though," said Harry hotly. "What's up with him?"

Professor Grubbly-Plank acted as though she couldn't hear him. She led them past the paddock where the huge Beauxbatons horses were standing, huddled against the cold, and toward a tree on the edge of the forest, where a large and beautiful unicorn was tethered.

Many of the girls "ooooohed!" at the sight of the unicorn.

"Oh it's so beautiful!" whispered Lavender Brown. "How did she get it? They're supposed to be really hard to catch!"

The unicorn was so brightly white it made the snow all around look gray. It was pawing the ground nervously with its golden hooves and throwing back its horned head.

"Boys keep back!" barked Professor Grubbly-Plank, throwing out an arm and catching Harry hard in the chest. "They prefer the woman's touch, unicorns. Girls to the front, and approach with care,

come on, easy does it. . . .”

She and the girls walked slowly forward toward the unicorn, leaving the boys standing near the paddock fence, watching. The moment Professor Grubbly-Plank was out of earshot, Harry turned to Ron.

“What d’you reckon’s wrong with him? You don’t think a skrewt — ?”

“Oh he hasn’t been attacked, Potter, if that’s what you’re thinking,” said Malfoy softly. “No, he’s just too ashamed to show his big, ugly face.”

“What d’you mean?” said Harry sharply.

Malfoy put his hand inside the pocket of his robes and pulled out a folded page of newsprint.

“There you go,” he said. “Hate to break it to you, Potter. . . .”

He smirked as Harry snatched the page, unfolded it, and read it, with Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville looking over his shoulder. It was an article topped with a picture of Hagrid looking extremely shift.

DUMBLEDORE’S GIANT MISTAKE

Albus Dumbledore, eccentric headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, has never been afraid to make controversial staff appointments, *writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent*. In September of this year, he hired Alastor “Mad-Eye” Moody, the notoriously jinx-happy ex-Auror, to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, a decision that caused many raised eyebrows at the Ministry

of Magic, given Moody's well-known habit of attacking anybody who makes a sudden movement in his presence. Mad-Eye Moody, however, looks responsible and kindly when set beside the part-human Dumbledore employs to teach Care of Magical Creatures.

Rubeus Hagrid, who admits to being expelled from Hogwarts in his third year, has enjoyed the position of gamekeeper at the school ever since, a job secured for him by Dumbledore. Last year, however, Hagrid used his mysterious influence over the headmaster to secure the additional post of Care of Magical Creatures teacher, over the heads of many better-qualified candidates.

An alarmingly large and ferocious-looking man, Hagrid has been using his newfound authority to terrify the students in his care with a succession of horrific creatures. While Dumbledore turns a blind eye, Hagrid has maimed several pupils during a series of lessons that many admit to being "very frightening."

"I was attacked by a hippogriff, and my friend Vincent Crabbe got a bad bite off a flobberworm," says Draco Malfoy, a fourth-year student. "We all hate Hagrid, but we're just too scared to say anything."

Hagrid has no intention of ceasing his campaign of intimidation, however. In conversation with a *Daily Prophet* reporter last month, he admitted breeding creatures he has dubbed "Blast-Ended Skrewts," highly dangerous crosses between manticores and fire-crabs. The

creation of new breeds of magical creature is, of course, an activity usually closely observed by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Hagrid, however, considers himself to be above such petty restrictions.

“I was just having some fun,” he says, before hastily changing the subject.

As if this were not enough, the *Daily Prophet* has now unearthed evidence that Hagrid is not — as he has always pretended — a pure-blood wizard. He is not, in fact, even pure human. His mother, we can exclusively reveal, is none other than the giantess Fridwulfa, whose whereabouts are currently unknown.

Bloodthirsty and brutal, the giants brought themselves to the point of extinction by warring amongst themselves during the last century. The handful that remained joined the ranks of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and were responsible for some of the worst mass Muggle killings of his reign of terror.

While many of the giants who served He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named were killed by Aurors working against the Dark Side, Fridwulfa was not among them. It is possible she escaped to one of the giant communities still existing in foreign mountain ranges. If his antics during Care of Magical Creatures lessons are any guide, however, Fridwulfa’s son appears to have inherited her brutal nature.

In a bizarre twist, Hagrid is reputed to have developed a

close friendship with the boy who brought around You-Know-Who's fall from power — thereby driving Hagrid's own mother, like the rest of You-Know-Who's supporters, into hiding. Perhaps Harry Potter is unaware of the unpleasant truth about his large friend — but Albus Dumbledore surely has a duty to ensure that Harry Potter, along with his fellow students, is warned about the dangers of associating with part-giants.

Harry finished reading and looked up at Ron, whose mouth was hanging open.

“How did she find out?” he whispered.

But that wasn't what was bothering Harry.

“What d'you mean, ‘we all hate Hagrid’?” Harry spat at Malfoy.

“What's this rubbish about *him*” — he pointed at Crabbe — “getting a bad bite off a flobberworm? They haven't even got teeth!”

Crabbe was sniggering, apparently very pleased with himself.

“Well, I think this should put an end to the oaf's teaching career,” said Malfoy, his eyes glinting. “Half-giant . . . and there was me thinking he'd just swallowed a bottle of Skele-Gro when he was young. . . . None of the mummies and daddies are going to like this at all. . . . They'll be worried he'll eat their kids, ha, ha. . . .”

“You —”

“Are you paying attention over there?”

Professor Grubbly-Plank's voice carried over to the boys; the girls were all clustered around the unicorn now, stroking it. Harry was so angry that the *Daily Prophet* article shook in his hands as he turned to

stare unseeingly at the unicorn, whose many magical properties Professor Grubbly-Plank was now enumerating in a loud voice, so that the boys could hear too.

“I hope she stays, that woman!” said Parvati Patil when the lesson had ended and they were all heading back to the castle for lunch. “That’s more what I thought Care of Magical Creatures would be like . . . proper creatures like unicorns, not monsters. . . .”

“What about Hagrid?” Harry said angrily as they went up the steps.

“What about him?” said Parvati in a hard voice. “He can still be gamekeeper, can’t he?”

Parvati had been very cool toward Harry since the ball. He supposed that he ought to have paid her a bit more attention, but she seemed to have had a good time all the same. She was certainly telling anybody who would listen that she had made arrangements to meet the boy from Beauxbatons in Hogsmeade on the next weekend trip.

“That was a really good lesson,” said Hermione as they entered the Great Hall. “I didn’t know half the things Professor Grubbly-Plank told us about uni —”

“Look at this!” Harry snarled, and he shoved the *Daily Prophet* article under Hermione’s nose.

Hermione’s mouth fell open as she read. Her reaction was exactly the same as Ron’s.

“How did that horrible Skeeter woman find out? You don’t think Hagrid *told* her?”

“No,” said Harry, leading the way over to the Gryffindor table and

throwing himself into a chair, furious. “He never even told us, did he? I reckon she was so mad he wouldn’t give her loads of horrible stuff about me, she went ferreting around to get him back.”

“Maybe she heard him telling Madame Maxime at the ball,” said Hermione quietly.

“We’d have seen her in the garden!” said Ron. “Anyway, she’s not supposed to come into school anymore, Hagrid said Dumbledore banned her. . . .”

“Maybe she’s got an Invisibility Cloak,” said Harry, ladling chicken casserole onto his plate and splashing it everywhere in his anger. “Sort of thing she’d do, isn’t it, hide in bushes listening to people.”

“Like you and Ron did, you mean,” said Hermione.

“We weren’t trying to hear him!” said Ron indignantly. “We didn’t have any choice! The stupid prat, talking about his giantess mother where anyone could have heard him!”

“We’ve got to go and see him,” said Harry. “This evening, after Divination. Tell him we want him back . . . you *do* want him back?” he shot at Hermione.

“I — well, I’m not going to pretend it didn’t make a nice change, having a proper Care of Magical Creatures lesson for once — but I do want Hagrid back, of course I do!” Hermione added hastily, quailing under Harry’s furious stare.

So that evening after dinner, the three of them left the castle once more and went down through the frozen grounds to Hagrid’s cabin. They knocked, and Fang’s booming barks answered.

“Hagrid, it’s us!” Harry shouted, pounding on the door. “Open up!”

Hagrid didn't answer. They could hear Fang scratching at the door, whining, but it didn't open. They hammered on it for ten more minutes; Ron even went and banged on one of the windows, but there was no response.

"What's he avoiding *us* for?" Hermione said when they had finally given up and were walking back to the school. "He surely doesn't think we'd care about him being half-giant?"

But it seemed that Hagrid did care. They didn't see a sign of him all week. He didn't appear at the staff table at mealtimes, they didn't see him going about his gamekeeper duties on the grounds, and Professor Grubbly-Plank continued to take the Care of Magical Creatures classes. Malfoy was gloating at every possible opportunity.

"Missing your half-breed pal?" he kept whispering to Harry whenever there was a teacher around, so that he was safe from Harry's retaliation. "Missing the elephant-man?"

There was a Hogsmeade visit halfway through January. Hermione was very surprised that Harry was going to go.

"I just thought you'd want to take advantage of the common room being quiet," she said. "Really get to work on that egg."

"Oh I — I reckon I've got a pretty good idea what it's about now," Harry lied.

"Have you really?" said Hermione, looking impressed. "Well done!"

Harry's insides gave a guilty squirm, but he ignored them. He still had five weeks to work out that egg clue, after all, and that was ages . . . whereas if he went into Hogsmeade, he might run into

Hagrid, and get a chance to persuade him to come back.

He, Ron, and Hermione left the castle together on Saturday and set off through the cold, wet grounds toward the gates. As they passed the Durmstrang ship moored in the lake, they saw Viktor Krum emerge onto the deck, dressed in nothing but swimming trunks. He was very skinny indeed, but apparently a lot tougher than he looked, because he climbed up onto the side of the ship, stretched out his arms, and dived, right into the lake.

“He’s mad!” said Harry, staring at Krum’s dark head as it bobbed out into the middle of the lake. “It must be freezing, it’s January!”

“It’s a lot colder where he comes from,” said Hermione. “I suppose it feels quite warm to him.”

“Yeah, but there’s still the giant squid,” said Ron. He didn’t sound anxious — if anything, he sounded hopeful. Hermione noticed his tone of voice and frowned.

“He’s really nice, you know,” she said. “He’s not at all like you’d think, coming from Durmstrang. He likes it much better here, he told me.”

Ron said nothing. He hadn’t mentioned Viktor Krum since the ball, but Harry had found a miniature arm under his bed on Boxing Day, which had looked very much as though it had been snapped off a small model figure wearing Bulgarian Quidditch robes.

Harry kept his eyes skinned for a sign of Hagrid all the way down the slushy High Street, and suggested a visit to the Three Broomsticks once he had ascertained that Hagrid was not in any of the shops.

The pub was as crowded as ever, but one quick look around at all the tables told Harry that Hagrid wasn’t there. Heart sinking, he went

up to the bar with Ron and Hermione, ordered three butterbeers from Madam Rosmerta, and thought gloomily that he might just as well have stayed behind and listened to the egg wailing after all.

“Doesn’t he *ever* go into the office?” Hermione whispered suddenly. “Look!”

She pointed into the mirror behind the bar, and Harry saw Ludo Bagman reflected there, sitting in a shadowy corner with a bunch of goblins. Bagman was talking very fast in a low voice to the goblins, all of whom had their arms crossed and were looking rather menacing.

It was indeed odd, Harry thought, that Bagman was here at the Three Broomsticks on a weekend when there was no Triwizard event, and therefore no judging to be done. He watched Bagman in the mirror. He was looking strained again, quite as strained as he had that night in the forest before the Dark Mark had appeared. But just then Bagman glanced over at the bar, saw Harry, and stood up.

“In a moment, in a moment!” Harry heard him say brusquely to the goblins, and Bagman hurried through the pub toward Harry, his boyish grin back in place.

“Harry!” he said. “How are you? Been hoping to run into you! Everything going all right?”

“Fine, thanks,” said Harry.

“Wonder if I could have a quick, private word, Harry?” said Bagman eagerly. “You couldn’t give us a moment, you two, could you?”

“Er — okay,” said Ron, and he and Hermione went off to find a table.

Bagman led Harry along the bar to the end furthest from Madam Rosmerta.

“Well, I just thought I’d congratulate you again on your splendid performance against that Horntail, Harry,” said Bagman. “Really superb.”

“Thanks,” said Harry, but he knew this couldn’t be all that Bagman wanted to say, because he could have congratulated Harry in front of Ron and Hermione. Bagman didn’t seem in any particular rush to spill the beans, though. Harry saw him glance into the mirror over the bar at the goblins, who were all watching him and Harry in silence through their dark, slanting eyes.

“Absolute nightmare,” said Bagman to Harry in an undertone, noticing Harry watching the goblins too. “Their English isn’t too good . . . it’s like being back with all the Bulgarians at the Quidditch World Cup . . . but at least *they* used sign language another human could recognize. This lot keep gabbling in Gobbledegook . . . and I only know one word of Gobbledegook. *Bladvak*. It means ‘pickax.’ I don’t like to use it in case they think I’m threatening them.”

He gave a short, booming laugh.

“What do they want?” Harry said, noticing how the goblins were still watching Bagman very closely.

“Er — well . . .” said Bagman, looking suddenly nervous. “They . . . er . . . they’re looking for Barty Crouch.”

“Why are they looking for him here?” said Harry. “He’s at the Ministry in London, isn’t he?”

“Er . . . as a matter of fact, I’ve no idea where he is,” said Bagman. “He’s sort of . . . stopped coming to work. Been absent for a

couple of weeks now. Young Percy, his assistant, says he's ill. Apparently he's just been sending instructions in by owl. But would you mind not mentioning that to anyone, Harry? Because Rita Skeeter's still poking around everywhere she can, and I'm willing to bet she'd work up Barty's illness into something sinister. Probably say he's gone missing like Bertha Jorkins."

"Have you heard anything about Bertha Jorkins?" Harry asked.

"No," said Bagman, looking strained again. "I've got people looking, of course . . ." (*About time*, thought Harry) "and it's all very strange. She definitely *arrived* in Albania, because she met her second cousin there. And then she left the cousin's house to go south and see an aunt . . . and she seems to have vanished without trace en route. Blowed if I can see where she's got to . . . she doesn't seem the type to elope, for instance . . . but still. . . . What are we doing, talking about goblins and Bertha Jorkins? I really wanted to ask you" — he lowered his voice — "how are you getting on with your golden egg?"

"Er . . . not bad," Harry said untruthfully.

Bagman seemed to know he wasn't being honest.

"Listen, Harry," he said (still in a very low voice), "I feel very bad about all this . . . you were thrown into this tournament, you didn't volunteer for it . . . and if . . ." (his voice was so quiet now, Harry had to lean closer to listen) "if I can help at all . . . a prod in the right direction . . . I've taken a liking to you . . . the way you got past that dragon! . . . well, just say the word."

Harry stared up into Bagman's round, rosy face and his wide, baby-blue eyes.

“We’re supposed to work out the clues alone, aren’t we?” he said, careful to keep his voice casual and not sound as though he was accusing the Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports of breaking the rules.

“Well . . . well, yes,” said Bagman impatiently, “but — come on, Harry — we all want a Hogwarts victory, don’t we?”

“Have you offered Cedric help?” Harry said.

The smallest of frowns creased Bagman’s smooth face. “No, I haven’t,” he said. “I — well, like I say, I’ve taken a liking to you. Just thought I’d offer . . .”

“Well, thanks,” said Harry, “but I think I’m nearly there with the egg . . . couple more days should crack it.”

He wasn’t entirely sure why he was refusing Bagman’s help, except that Bagman was almost a stranger to him, and accepting his assistance would feel somehow much more like cheating than asking advice from Ron, Hermione, or Sirius.

Bagman looked almost affronted, but couldn’t say much more as Fred and George turned up at that point.

“Hello, Mr. Bagman,” said Fred brightly. “Can we buy you a drink?”

“Er . . . no,” said Bagman, with a last disappointed glance at Harry, “no, thank you, boys . . .”

Fred and George looked quite as disappointed as Bagman, who was surveying Harry as though he had let him down badly.

“Well, I must dash,” he said. “Nice seeing you all. Good luck, Harry.”

He hurried out of the pub. The goblins all slid off their chairs and

exited after him. Harry went to rejoin Ron and Hermione.

“What did he want?” Ron said, the moment Harry had sat down.

“He offered to help me with the golden egg,” said Harry.

“He shouldn’t be doing that!” said Hermione, looking very shocked. “He’s one of the judges! And anyway, you’ve already worked it out — haven’t you?”

“Er . . . nearly,” said Harry.

“Well, I don’t think Dumbledore would like it if he knew Bagman was trying to persuade you to cheat!” said Hermione, still looking deeply disapproving. “I hope he’s trying to help Cedric as much!”

“He’s not, I asked,” said Harry.

“Who cares if Diggory’s getting help?” said Ron. Harry privately agreed.

“Those goblins didn’t look very friendly,” said Hermione, sipping her butterbeer. “What were they doing here?”

“Looking for Crouch, according to Bagman,” said Harry. “He’s still ill. Hasn’t been into work.”

“Maybe Percy’s poisoning him,” said Ron. “Probably thinks if Crouch snuffs it he’ll be made Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation.”

Hermione gave Ron a don’t-joke-about-things-like-that look, and said, “Funny, goblins looking for Mr. Crouch. . . . They’d normally deal with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.”

“Crouch can speak loads of different languages, though,” said Harry. “Maybe they need an interpreter.”

“Worrying about poor ’ickle goblins, now, are you?” Ron asked

Hermione. “Thinking of starting up S.P.U.G. or something? Society for the Protection of Ugly Goblins?”

“Ha, ha, ha,” said Hermione sarcastically. “Goblins don’t need protection. Haven’t you been listening to what Professor Binns has been telling us about goblin rebellions?”

“No,” said Harry and Ron together.

“Well, they’re quite capable of dealing with wizards,” said Hermione, taking another sip of butterbeer. “They’re very clever. They’re not like house-elves, who never stick up for themselves.”

“Uh-oh,” said Ron, staring at the door.

Rita Skeeter had just entered. She was wearing banana-yellow robes today; her long nails were painted shocking pink, and she was accompanied by her paunchy photographer. She bought drinks, and she and the photographer made their way through the crowds to a table nearby, Harry, Ron, and Hermione glaring at her as she approached. She was talking fast and looking very satisfied about something.

“. . . didn’t seem very keen to talk to us, did he, Bozo? Now, why would that be, do you think? And what’s he doing with a pack of goblins in tow anyway? Showing them the sights . . . what nonsense . . . he was always a bad liar. Reckon something’s up? Think we should do a bit of digging? ‘Disgraced Ex-Head of Magical Games and Sports, Ludo Bagman . . . ’ Snappy start to a sentence, Bozo — we just need to find a story to fit it —”

“Trying to ruin someone else’s life?” said Harry loudly.

A few people looked around. Rita Skeeter’s eyes widened behind her jeweled spectacles as she saw who had spoken.

“Harry!” she said, beaming. “How lovely! Why don’t you come and join — ?”

“I wouldn’t come near you with a ten-foot broomstick,” said Harry furiously. “What did you do that to Hagrid for, eh?”

Rita Skeeter raised her heavily penciled eyebrows.

“Our readers have a right to the truth, Harry. I am merely doing my —”

“Who cares if he’s half-giant?” Harry shouted. “There’s nothing wrong with him!”

The whole pub had gone very quiet. Madam Rosmerta was staring over from behind the bar, apparently oblivious to the fact that the flagon she was filling with mead was overflowing.

Rita Skeeter’s smile flickered very slightly, but she hitched it back almost at once; she snapped open her crocodile-skin handbag, pulled out her Quick-Quotes Quill, and said, “How about giving me an interview about the Hagrid *you* know, Harry? The man behind the muscles? Your unlikely friendship and the reasons behind it. Would you call him a father substitute?”

Hermione stood up very abruptly, her butterbeer clutched in her hand as though it were a grenade.

“You horrible woman,” she said, through gritted teeth, “you don’t care, do you, anything for a story, and anyone will do, won’t they? Even Ludo Bagman —”

“Sit down, you silly little girl, and don’t talk about things you don’t understand,” said Rita Skeeter coldly, her eyes hardening as they fell on Hermione. “I know things about Ludo Bagman that would make your hair curl . . . *not* that it needs it —” she added, eyeing

Hermione's bushy hair.

"Let's go," said Hermione, "c'mon, Harry — Ron . . ."

They left; many people were staring at them as they went. Harry glanced back as they reached the door. Rita Skeeter's Quick-Quotes Quill was out; it was zooming backward and forward over a piece of parchment on the table.

"She'll be after you next, Hermione," said Ron in a low and worried voice as they walked quickly back up the street.

"Let her try!" said Hermione defiantly; she was shaking with rage. "I'll show her! Silly little girl, am I? Oh, I'll get her back for this. First Harry, then Hagrid . . ."

"You don't want to go upsetting Rita Skeeter," said Ron nervously. "I'm serious, Hermione, she'll dig up something on you —"

"My parents don't read the *Daily Prophet*. She can't scare me into hiding!" said Hermione, now striding along so fast that it was all Harry and Ron could do to keep up with her. The last time Harry had seen Hermione in a rage like this, she had hit Draco Malfoy around the face. "And Hagrid isn't hiding anymore! He should *never* have let that excuse for a human being upset him! Come *on!*"

Breaking into a run, she led them all the way back up the road, through the gates flanked by winged boars, and up through the grounds to Hagrid's cabin.

The curtains were still drawn, and they could hear Fang barking as they approached.

"Hagrid!" Hermione shouted, pounding on his front door. "Hagrid, that's enough! We know you're in there! Nobody cares if your mum was a giantess, Hagrid! You can't let that foul Skeeter woman do this

to you! Hagrid, get out here, you're just being —"

The door opened. Hermione said, "About t — !" and then stopped, very suddenly, because she had found herself face-to-face, not with Hagrid, but with Albus Dumbledore.

"Good afternoon," he said pleasantly, smiling down at them.

"We — er — we wanted to see Hagrid," said Hermione in a rather small voice.

"Yes, I surmised as much," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "Why don't you come in?"

"Oh . . . um . . . okay," said Hermione.

She, Ron, and Harry went into the cabin; Fang launched himself upon Harry the moment he entered, barking madly and trying to lick his ears. Harry fended off Fang and looked around.

Hagrid was sitting at his table, where there were two large mugs of tea. He looked a real mess. His face was blotchy, his eyes swollen, and he had gone to the other extreme where his hair was concerned; far from trying to make it behave, it now looked like a wig of tangled wire.

"Hi, Hagrid," said Harry.

Hagrid looked up.

"Lo," he said in a very hoarse voice.

"More tea, I think," said Dumbledore, closing the door behind Harry, Ron, and Hermione, drawing out his wand, and twiddling it; a revolving tea tray appeared in midair along with a plate of cakes. Dumbledore magicked the tray onto the table, and everybody sat down. There was a slight pause, and then Dumbledore said, "Did you by any chance hear what Miss Granger was shouting, Hagrid?"

Hermione went slightly pink, but Dumbledore smiled at her and continued, “Hermione, Harry, and Ron still seem to want to know you, judging by the way they were attempting to break down the door.”

“Of course we still want to know you!” Harry said, staring at Hagrid. “You don’t think anything that Skeeter cow — sorry, Professor,” he added quickly, looking at Dumbledore.

“I have gone temporarily deaf and haven’t any idea what you said, Harry,” said Dumbledore, twiddling his thumbs and staring at the ceiling.

“Er — right,” said Harry sheepishly. “I just meant — Hagrid, how could you think we’d care what that — woman — wrote about you?”

Two fat tears leaked out of Hagrid’s beetle-black eyes and fell slowly into his tangled beard.

“Living proof of what I’ve been telling you, Hagrid,” said Dumbledore, still looking carefully up at the ceiling. “I have shown you the letters from the countless parents who remember you from their own days here, telling me in no uncertain terms that if I sacked you, they would have something to say about it —”

“Not all of ’em,” said Hagrid hoarsely. “Not all of ’em wan’ me ter stay.”

“Really, Hagrid, if you are holding out for universal popularity, I’m afraid you will be in this cabin for a very long time,” said Dumbledore, now peering sternly over his half-moon spectacles. “Not a week has passed since I became headmaster of this school when I haven’t had at least one owl complaining about the way I run it. But what should I do? Barricade myself in my study and refuse to

talk to anybody?”

“Yeh — yeh’re not half-giant!” said Hagrid croakily.

“Hagrid, look what I’ve got for relatives!” Harry said furiously. “Look at the Dursleys!”

“An excellent point,” said Professor Dumbledore. “My own brother, Aberforth, was prosecuted for practicing inappropriate charms on a goat. It was all over the papers, but did Aberforth hide? No, he did not! He held his head high and went about his business as usual! Of course, I’m not entirely sure he can read, so that may not have been bravery. . . .”

“Come back and teach, Hagrid,” said Hermione quietly, “please come back, we really miss you.”

Hagrid gulped. More tears leaked out down his cheeks and into his tangled beard.

Dumbledore stood up. “I refuse to accept your resignation, Hagrid, and I expect you back at work on Monday,” he said. “You will join me for breakfast at eight-thirty in the Great Hall. No excuses. Good afternoon to you all.”

Dumbledore left the cabin, pausing only to scratch Fang’s ears. When the door had shut behind him, Hagrid began to sob into his dustbin-lid-sized hands. Hermione kept patting his arm, and at last, Hagrid looked up, his eyes very red indeed, and said, “Great man, Dumbledore . . . great man . . .”

“Yeah, he is,” said Ron. “Can I have one of these cakes, Hagrid?”

“Help yerself,” said Hagrid, wiping his eyes on the back of his hand. “Ar, he’s righ’, o’ course — yeh’re all righ’ . . . I bin stupid . . . my ol’ dad woulda bin ashamed o’ the way I’ve bin behavin’. . . .”

More tears leaked out, but he wiped them away more forcefully, and said, “Never shown you a picture of my old dad, have I? Here . . .”

Hagrid got up, went over to his dresser, opened a drawer, and pulled out a picture of a short wizard with Hagrid’s crinkled black eyes, beaming as he sat on top of Hagrid’s shoulder. Hagrid was a good seven or eight feet tall, judging by the apple tree beside him, but his face was beardless, young, round, and smooth — he looked hardly older than eleven.

“Tha’ was taken jus’ after I got inter Hogwarts,” Hagrid croaked. “Dad was dead chuffed . . . thought I migh’ not be a wizard, see, ’cos me mum . . . well, anyway. ’Course, I never was great shakes at magic, really . . . but at least he never saw me expelled. Died, see, in me second year. . . .

“Dumbledore was the one who stuck up for me after Dad went. Got me the gamekeeper job . . . trusts people, he does. Gives ’em second chances . . . tha’s what sets him apar’ from other Heads, see. He’ll accept anyone at Hogwarts, s’long as they’ve got the talent. Knows people can turn out okay even if their families weren’ . . . well . . . all tha’ respectable. But some don’ understand that. There’s some who’d always hold it against yeh . . . there’s some who’d even pretend they just had big bones rather than stand up an’ say — I am what I am, an’ I’m not ashamed. ‘Never be ashamed,’ my ol’ dad used ter say, ‘there’s some who’ll hold it against you, but they’re not worth botherin’ with.’ An’ he was right. I’ve bin an idiot. I’m not botherin’ with *her* no more, I promise yeh that. Big bones . . . I’ll give her big bones.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another nervously; Harry

would rather have taken fifty Blast-Ended Skrewts for a walk than admit to Hagrid that he had overheard him talking to Madame Maxime, but Hagrid was still talking, apparently unaware that he had said anything odd.

“Yeh know wha’, Harry?” he said, looking up from the photograph of his father, his eyes very bright, “when I firs’ met you, you reminded me o’ me a bit. Mum an’ Dad gone, an’ you was feelin’ like yeh wouldn’ fit in at Hogwarts, remember? Not sure yeh were really up to it . . . an’ now look at yeh, Harry! School champion!”

He looked at Harry for a moment and then said, very seriously, “Yeh know what I’d love, Harry? I’d love yeh ter win, I really would. It’d show ’em all . . . yeh don’ have ter be pureblood ter do it. Yeh don’ have ter be ashamed of what yeh are. It’d show ’em Dumbledore’s the one who’s got it righ’, lettin’ anyone in as long as they can do magic. How you doin’ with that egg, Harry?”

“Great,” said Harry. “Really great.”

Hagrid’s miserable face broke into a wide, watery smile.

“Tha’s my boy . . . you show ’em, Harry, you show ’em. Beat ’em all.”

Lying to Hagrid wasn’t quite like lying to anyone else. Harry went back to the castle later that afternoon with Ron and Hermione, unable to banish the image of the happy expression on Hagrid’s whiskery face as he had imagined Harry winning the tournament. The incomprehensible egg weighed more heavily than ever on Harry’s conscience that evening, and by the time he had got into bed, he had made up his mind — it was time to shelve his pride and see if Cedric’s hint was worth anything.

Rika Skinner se Troefberig

Op Tweede Kersdag staan almal laat op. Griffindor se geselskamer is baie stiller as wat dit die laaste tyd was en vele gape onderbreek die loom gesprekke. Hermien se hare is weer bosserig; sy erken teenoor Harry dat sy 'n groot klomp Glipgladde-haarroom vir die bal opgesmeer het, "maar dis te veel moeite om dit elke dag te doen," sê sy saaklik terwyl sy 'n spinnende Kromskeen agter die ore krap.

Dit lyk asof Ron en Hermien stilswyend ooreengekom het om nie verder te stry nie. Hulle is redelik vriendelik met mekaar, hoewel effens formeel. Ron en Harry laat nie gras onder hul voete groei nie en vertel vir Hermien van die gesprek tussen Hagrid en Madame Maxine wat hulle gehoor het, maar dit lyk asof die nuus dat Hagrid 'n halfreus is nie naastenby so 'n skok vir haar is as wat dit vir Ron was nie.

"Wel, ek het gedink hy moet een wees," sê sy skouerophalend. "Ek het geweet hy kan nie 'n suiwer reus wees nie, want hulle is omtrent ses meter lank. Maar regtig, al hierdie histerie oor reuse. Hulle kan nie *almal* so aaklig wil wees nie . . . dis dieselfde soort vooroordeel wat mense teenoor weerwolwe het . . . dis net kortsigtheid, nie waar nie?"

Ron lyk asof hy 'n honende aanmerking wil maak, maar hy sien waarskynlik nie vir nog 'n uitval kans nie, want hy skud sy kop bloot ongelowig toe Hermien nie kyk nie.

Dit is tyd om aan die huiswerk wat hulle tydens die eerste week van die vakansie verwaarloos het, te dink. Noudat Kersfees verby is, lyk dit asof almal so ietwat verveeld is – almal behalwe Harry wat nou begin om (weer eens) effens op sy senuwees te raak.

Die probleem is dat die vier-en-twintigste Februarie baie nader lyk noudat Kersfees verby is. Boonop het hy nog glad nie aan die leidraad binne-in die goue eier gewerk nie. In die hoop dat hy iets wys sal word, haal hy die eier uit sy trommel elke keer dat hy na die slaapsaal gaan. Dan maak hy dit oop en luister deeglik daarna. Hy span homself in om uit te werk waaraan die geluid hom laat dink anders as dertig musieksae, maar so iets het hy nog nooit tevore gehoor nie. Hy maak die eier toe, skud dit woes en maak dit weer oop om te kyk of dit dalk anders klink, maar dit

help nie. Hy vra vir die eier vrae, skree bo-oor die gekerm, maar niks gebeur nie. Hy gooi die eier selfs oor die vertrek – hoewel hy nie regtig verwag het dat dit sal help nie.

Harry het die wenk wat Cedric hom gegee het, nie vergeet nie, dis net dat sy minder-as-vriendelike gevoelens teenoor Cedric beteken dat hy nie lus is om sy hulp te aanvaar as dit nie regtig nodig is nie. Dit lyk in elk geval nie asof Cedric hom regtig wou help nie. Hy kon alles baie duideliker uitgestippel het. Hy wat Harry is, het vir Cedric presies gesê wat in die eerste taak op hom wag – en Cedric se idee van 'n billike ruil is om vir Harry te sê hy moet gaan bad. Wel, daardie simpel soort hulp het hy nie nodig nie – nie van iemand wat aanhoudend in die gange met Cho loop en handjies hou nie. Toe Harry dus op die eerste dag van die kwartaal klas toe gaan, soos gewoonlik swaar gelaai onder boeke, perkament en veerpenne, lê die kruipende kommer oor die eier ook swaar in sy maag, nes of hy dit ook met hom saamdra.

Die sneeu lê nog dik op die terrein en die kweekhuis se vensters is so toegewasem dat hulle gedurende Herbologie nie buitentoe kan sien nie. In hierdie weer sien niemand uit na Versorging van Magiese Kreature nie, hoewel, soos Ron sê, die Krewels hulle waarskynlik lekker warm sal laat word, óf deur hulle te jaag, óf deur so erg te spuit dat Hagrid se hut aan die brand slaan.

Toe hulle egter by Hagrid se hut kom, staan daar 'n bejaarde heks met kortgeknippte grys hare en 'n baie prominente ken voor sy voordeur.

“Opskud, die klok het al vyf minute gelede gelui,” blaf sy toe hulle deur die sneeu aangesukkel kom.

“Wie's u?” vra Ron en staar na haar. “Waar's Hagrid?”

“My naam is professor Growweblaar,” sê sy pront, “en ek is jul tydelike onderwyser vir Versorging van Magiese Kreature.”

“Waar's Hagrid?” herhaal Harry hard.

“Hy voel nie lekker nie,” sê professor Growweblaar kortaf.

'n Gedempte en onaangename laggie bereik Harry se ore. Hy draai om; Draco Malfoy en die res van die Slibberins het by die klas aangesluit. Hulle lyk almal uiters vrolik en niemand lyk verbaas om professor Growweblaar daar te sien nie.

“Hierdie kant toe, asseblief,” sê professor Growweblaar en sy stap om die kamp waar die groot Beauxbatons-perde staan en bewe. Harry, Ron en Hermien volg haar terwyl hulle oor hul skouers na Hagrid se hut kyk. Al die gordyne is toegetrek. Is Hagrid daar binne, alleen en siek?

“Wat makeer Hagrid?” vra Harry terwyl hy vinnig stap om professor Growweblaar in te haal.

“Maak nie saak nie,” sê sy asof sy reken dat hy bloot nuuskierig is.

“Dit maak vir my saak,” sê Harry vererg. “Wat gaan met hom aan?”

Professor Growweblaar maak asof sy nie gehoor het nie. Sy lei hulle

tot hy 'n boom aan die kant van die Woud waaraan 'n pragtige groot eenhoring vasgemaak is.

'n Klomp van die meisies "oooo" toe hulle die eenhoring sien.

"Oe, hy's so mooi!" fluister Hildegard Braun. "Waar kom sy daaraan?"

Hulle's glo baie moeilik om te vang!"

Die eenhoring is so skitterwit dat die sneeu eintlik grys lyk daarteen. Hy kap senuagtig met sy goue hoewe teen die grond en gooi sy gehoringde kop agteroor.

"Seuns, staan terug!" blaf professor Growweblaar terwyl sy 'n arm uitgooi waarmee sy Harry hard teen die bors vang. "Eenhoringe verkies vroulike aanraking. Meisies voor en kom versigtig nader. Komaan, stadig . . ."

Sy en die meisies stap stadig op die eenhoring af terwyl die seuns langs die heining om die kamp staan en kyk.

Die oomblik toe professor Growweblaar buite hoorafstand is, draai Harry na Ron. "Wat dink jy gaan met hom aan? Jy dink nie een van die Krewels het dalk -?"

"O, hy's nie aangeval nie, Potter, as dit is wat jy dink," sê Malfoy sag. "Nee, hy's bloot te skaam om sy lelike groot gesig te wys."

"Wat bedoel jy?" sê Harry kwaai.

Malfoy steek sy hand in sy kleed se sak en haal 'n gevoude stuk koerantpapier uit.

"Hierso," sê hy. "Ek haat dit om die nuus op hierdie manier te breek, Potter . . ."

Hy grynsag toe Harry die bladsy gryp, dit oopvou en lees terwyl Ron, Septimus, Dean en Neville oor sy skouer kyk. Dit is 'n artikel met 'n foto van Hagrid wat hom soos 'n regte skelm laat lyk.

DOMPELDORIUS SE REUSEFLATER

Albus Dompeldorius, eksentrieke skoolhoof van Hogwarts Skool vir Towerkuns en Heksery, was nog nooit bang om veelbesproke personeel-aanstellings te maak nie, skryf Rika Skinner, Spesiale Korrespondent. In September van hierdie jaar het hy vir Alastor "Maloog" Moodie, die berugte towerspelerskrikte ex-Auror in diens geneem om Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste te onderrig, 'n besluit wat menige wenkbrou aan die Ministerie vir Towerkuns laat lig het, gegee Moodie se welbekende gewoonte om diegene wat skielik bewegings in sy teenwoordigheid maak, aan te val. Maloog Moodie lyk egter verantwoordelik en goedig in vergelyking met die halfmens wat Dompeldorius aangestel het om Versorging van Magiese Kreature te onderrig.

Rubeus Hagrid, wat erken dat hy in sy derde jaar uit Hogwarts geskors is, is sedertdien by die skool as boswagter aangestel, 'n pos wat Dompeldorius vir hom geskep het. Verlede jaar het Hagrid egter sy ge-

heidsinnige invloed oor die skoolhoof ingespan om die addisionele pos van Versorging van Magiese Kreature oor die koppe van ander, beter gekwalifiseerde mense te bekom.

Hagrid, 'n ontstellend groot man met 'n wreedaardige voorkoms, het hierdie nuutgevonde gesag gebruik om die studente in sy sorg met 'n opeenvolging van afskuwekkende kreature te verskrik. Terwyl Dompeldorius dit oogluikend toelaat, het Hagrid etlike van sy leerlinge tydens 'n reeks lesse vermink op 'n manier wat baie erken "uiters skrikwekkend" was.

"Ek is deur 'n Hippogrief aangeval en my vriend Vincent Krabbe is lelik deur 'n Flobberwurm gebyt," sê Draco Malfoy, 'n vierdejaarstudent. "Ons almal haat vir Hagrid, maar ons is te bang om iets te sê."

Hagrid is glad nie van plan om hierdie kampanje van intimidasie te laat vaar nie. In 'n gesprek met 'n verslaggewer van die Daaglikse Profeet die vorige maand, het hy erken dat hy kreature wat hy Spuitstertkrewels noem, 'n gevaarlike kruising tussen mantikoriums en vuurkrappe, geteel het. Die skepping van nuwe magiese spesies is natuurlik 'n aktiwiteit wat gewoonlik fyn deur die Departement vir die Regulering en Beheer van Magiese Kreature dopgehou word. Dit lyk egter asof Hagrid homself as verhewe bo sulke netelige beperkings beskou.

"Dis net vir die pret," het hy gesê voor hy die onderwerp haastig verander het.

Asof dit nie erg genoeg is nie, het die Daaglikse Profeet ook bewyse opgediep wat daarop dui dat Hagrid nie – soos hy nog altyd voorgegee het – 'n volbloed-towenaar is nie. Hy is in der waarheid slegs halfpad mens. Sy ma, kan ons eksklusief onthul, is niemand anders nie as die reusin Fridwulfa, wie se verblyf tans onbekend is.

Bloeddorstig en brutaal, het die reuse hulself op die rand van uitwissing gebring deur tydens die laaste eeu oorlog onder mekaar te maak. Die hand vol wat oorgebly het, het hulle by die geleedere van Jy-Weet-Wie geskaar en was tydens sy bewind van terreur vir sommige van die ergste massa-Moggelmoorde verantwoordelik.

Hoewel baie van die reuse wat onder Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie gedien het deur Aurors wat teen die Donker kant gewerk het, doodgemaak is, was Fridwulfa nie onder hulle nie. Dit is moontlik dat sy na die reusegemeenskappe wat nog steeds in veraf bergreekse hou, gevlug het. Indien die streke wat hy gedurende die Versorging van Magiese Kreature-klasse uithaal enigsins 'n aanduiding is, wil dit lyk asof Fridwulfa se seun haar brutale geaardheid geërf het.

In 'n bisarre sameloop van omstandighede wil dit voorkom asof Hagrid 'n hegte vriendskap aangeknoop het met die seun wat Jy-Weet-Wie se ondergang bewerkstellig het – en daarmee Hagrid se eie moeder, soos die res van Jy-Weet-Wie se ondersteuners, in ballingskap gedryf het.

Dalk is Harry Potter onbewus van die onaangename waarhede oor sy enorme vriend – maar Albus Dompeldorius het gewis ’n plig om te verseker dat Harry Potter, tesame met sy medestudente, kennis dra van die gevare verbonde aan assosiasie met halfreus.

Toe Harry klaar gelees het, kyk hy na Ron wie se mond oophang.

“Hoe weet sy dit?” fluister hy.

Dit is egter nie wat vir Harry pla nie.

“Wat bedoel jy met ‘Ons almal haat vir Hagrid?’” spoeg Harry na Malfoy. “Watter twak is dit oor *hom*” – hy wys na Krabbe – “wat lelik deur ’n l’lobberwurm gebyt is? Hulle het nie eens tande nie!”

Krabbe giggel, duidelik in sy skik met homself.

“Wel, ek dink dit behoort ’n einde aan daardie idioot se onderwysloopbaan te maak,” sê Malfoy en sy oë glinster. “Halfreus . . . en ek dink nog die hele tyd dat hy ’n bottel Skele-Groei ingesluk het toe hy klein was . . . geeneen van die mummies en pappies gaan hiervan hou nie . . . netnou eet hy hulle kinders, ha, ha . . .”

“Jou –”

“Julle daar, gee julle aandag?”

Professor Growweblaar se stem dra tot by die seuns; die meisies staan nou almal om die eenhoring en is besig om dit te streel. Harry is so kwaad dat die *Daaglikse Profeet* in sy hande bewe toe hy omdraai om onsiende na die eenhoring te staar terwyl professor Growweblaar in ’n harde stem sodat die seuns ook kan hoor oor die dier se magiese eienskappe uitwei.

“Ek hoop daardie vrou bly aan,” sê Parvati Patel toe die les oor is en hulle vir middagete terug kasteel toe stap. “Dit was meer hoe ek my nog altyd voorgestel het Versorging van Magiese Creature moet wees . . . behoorlike creature soos eenhorings, nie monsters . . .”

“En wat van Hagrid?” sê Harry woedend toe hulle met die trappe opstap.

“Wat van hom?” sê Parvati in ’n harde stem. “Hy kan mos nog steeds boswagter wees?”

Sedert die bal is Parvati uiters koel teenoor Harry. Hy weet hy moes seker meer aandag aan haar gegee het, maar dit het tog gelyk asof sy dit later geniet het. Sy vertel aan almal wat wil luister dat sy gereël het om die Beauxbatons-seun tydens hul volgende naweekuitstappie in Hogsmeade te ontmoet.

“Dit was ’n werklik goeie les,” sê Hermien toe hulle die Groot Saal binstap. “Ek het nie die helfte van die goed oor eenhorings wat professor Growweblaar vir ons geleer het, gewee–”

“Kyk hier!” jak Harry haar af toe hy die artikel uit die *Daaglikse Profeet* onder haar neus druk.

Hermien se mond val oop terwyl sy dit lees en haar reaksie is nes Ron s'n. "Hoe weet daardie aaklige Skinner-vrou dit alles? Julle dink darem seker nie dat Hagrid vir haar gesê het nie?"

"Nee," sê Harry wat tot by die Griffindortafel loop waar hy homself ergelik in 'n stoel slinger. "Hy't nooit eens vir ons gesê nie, het hy? Ek dink sy was so vies toe Hagrid nie allerhande aaklige goed oor my gesê het nie dat sy oral rondgesnuffel het net om hom terug te kry."

"Dalk het sy gehoor wat hy vir Madame Maxine by die bal vertel het," sê Hermien gedemp.

"Ons sou haar mos daar in die tuin gesien het!" sê Ron. "En in elk geval, sy mag nie meer na die skool toe kom nie, Hagrid het gesê Dompeldorius het haar verbied . . ."

"Dalk het sy 'n onsigbaarheidsmantel," sê Harry terwyl hy van die hoenderkasserol in sy bord skep en uit pure woede oral mors. "Soort ding wat sy sal doen, nè, agter bosse wegkruip en mense afluister."

"Jy bedoel, soos jy en Ron," sê Hermien.

"Ons wou nie afluister nie!" sê Ron verontwaardig. "Ons kon nie anders nie! Die simpel ou pampoen, om oor sy reusema te praat waar almal hom kan hoor!"

"Ons moet hom gaan sien," sê Harry. "Net vanaand, na Waarsêery. Vir hom sê ons wil hom terughê . . . Jy wil hom darem seker terughê, of hoe?" sê hy kwaai vir Hermien.

"Ek – wel, ek gaan nie voorgee dat dit nie 'n lekker verandering was om 'n slag 'n behoorlike Versorging van Magiese Creature-les te hê nie – maar ek wil vir Hagrid terughê, natuurlik wil ek!" voeg Hermien haastig by toe Harry so woedend na haar gluur dat sy eintlik terugdeins.

Daardie aand na aandete verlaat die drie dus die kasteel en stap oor die verysde terrein na Hagrid se hut. Toe hulle klop, word hulle deur Tande se dawerende geblaf begroet.

"Hagrid, dis ons!" skree Harry en hamer teen die deur. "Maak oop!"

Hy antwoord nie. Hulle hoor hoe Tande tjankend teen die deur krap, maar dit gaan nie oop nie. Vir nog ten minste tien minute hamer hulle teen die deur; Ron gaan slaan selfs teen een van die vensters, maar daar is geen reaksie nie.

"Hoekom wil hy ons vermy?" sê Hermien toe hulle uiteindelik moed opgee en terug skool toe stap. "Hy dink darem seker nie dat ons omgee dat hy 'n halfreus is nie?"

Dit blyk egter dat Hagrid wel omgee. Die hele week sien hulle nie 'n teken van hom nie. Hy verskyn nie aan die personeeltafel vir etes nie, hulle sien hom nie op die terrein waar hy sy pligte as boswagter nakom nie en professor Growweblaar gaan voort om die Versorging van Magiese Creature-klasse waar te neem. Malfoy gebruik elke moontlike geleentheid om vermakerig te wees.

“Jy mis seker jou basterpêl?” fluister hy aanhoudend vir Harry as daar h onderwyser in die rondte is sodat Harry nie kan wraak neem nie. “Jy mis seker die olifantman?”

In die middel van Januarie is daar weer ’n Hogsmeade-besoek. Hermien is baie verbaas toe sy agterkom dat Harry van plan is om te gaan.

“Ek sou reken dat jy die kans om in ’n stil geselskamer te werk, sou wou gebruik,” sê sy, “om aan daardie eier te werk.”

“O, ek – ek dink ek weet nou heel goed waarom dit gaan,” jok Harry.

“Regtig?” sê Hermien en sy lyk beïndruk. “Mooi so!”

Harry se binnegoed gee ’n skuldige draai, maar hy ignoreer dit. Daar is na alles nog vyf weke oor om aan die eierleidraad te werk en dit is eene en indien hy Hogsmeade toe gaan, loop hy dalk vir Hagrid raak en is daar dalk ’n kans om hom te oorreed om terug te kom.

Daardie Saterdag stap hy, Ron en Hermien saam by die kasteel uit en oor die koue, nat terrein na waar die hekke is. Toe hulle verby die Durmstrang-skip gaan wat in die water vasgemeer lê, sien hulle hoe Viktor Krum, net in ’n swembroek, op die dek verskyn. Hy is baie maer, maar skynbaar heelwat taaier as wat hy lyk, want hy loop tot teen die kant van die skip, strek sy arms en duik in.

“Hy’s mal!” sê Harry terwyl hy na Krum se donker kop staar waar dit in die middel van die meer ronddobber. “Dit moet vriesend koud wees, dis dan Januarie!”

“Dis baie kouer waar hy vandaan kom,” sê Hermien. “Dit voel seker vir hom warm.”

“Ja, maar daar’s nog steeds die reuse-inkvis,” sê Ron. Hy klink nie juis bekommerd nie – eerder hoopvol. Hermien frons toe sy sy stemtoon hoor.

“Hy’s regtig baie gaaf, weet jy,” sê sy. “Hy’s glad nie soos julle dink nie, al kom hy van Durmstrang af. Hy sê hy hou baie meer daarvan hier.”

Ron sê niks. Sedert die bal het hy nog nie weer oor Victor Krum gepraat nie, maar Harry het op Tweede Kersdag ’n miniatuurarm onder sy bed gekry wat baie gelyk het asof dit van ’n klein modelletjie in Bulgaarse Kwiddieklere af kom.

Die hele ent in die modderige Hoogstraat af hou Harry sy oë oop vir ’n teken van Hagrid. Toe hy seker is dat Hagrid nie in enige van die winkels is nie, stel hy voor dat hulle na die Drie Besemstokke gaan.

Die kroeg is net so vol soos altyd, maar een vinnige blik in die rondte oortuig Harry dat Hagrid nie daar is nie. Met ’n sinkende hart gaan hy saam met Ron en Hermien na die toonbank om drie Botterbiere by Madame Rosmerta te bestel terwyl hy mistroostig dink dat hy net sowel by die kasteel kon gebly het om na die eier se gekerm te luister.

“Gaan hy dan *nooit* kantoor toe nie?” fluister Hermien skielik. “Kyk!”

Sy wys na die spieël agter die kroegtoonbank en Harry sien Ludo Bag-

man se weerkaatsing waar hy in 'n skemerdonker hoek by 'n klomp gnome sit en gesels. Bagman praat baie vinnig en in 'n gedempte stem terwyl die gnome met hul gekruiste arms besonder dreigend lyk.

Dit is regtig snaaks, dink Harry, dat Bagman oor 'n naweek, terwyl daar geen Drietowenaarsnommer is om te beoordeel nie, hier in die Drie Besemstokke is. Hy hou Bagman in die spieël dop. Hy lyk weer baie gespanne, net so gespanne soos die nag in die bos, voor die Donker Merk verskyn het. Net toe dwaal Bagman se oë egter oor die kroeg. Toe hy vir Harry sien, staan hy op.

"Netnou, netnou!" hoor Harry hom bruusk vir die gnome sê en toe Bagman haastig deur die kroeg na Harry gestap kom, is sy seunsagtige glimlag weer ferm in posisie.

"Harry!" sê hy. "Hoe gaan dit? Het gehoop ek gaan jou raakloop! Gaan alles nog goed?"

"Ja dankie," sê Harry.

"Wonder of ek gou 'n vinnige woordjie eenkant met jou kan wissel, Harry?" sê Bagman gretig. "Sal julle twee ons dalk 'n kansie gee?"

"H'm – oukei," sê Ron en hy en Hermien gaan soek vir hulle 'n tafel.

Bagman lei Harry deur die kroeg na die hoek wat die verste van Madame Rosmerta af is.

"Wel, ek moet jou eers net weer gelukwens met jou uitmuntende vertoning teen daardie Horingstert, Harry," sê Bagman. "Werklik voortreflik."

"Dankie," sê Harry, maar hy weet dat dit nie al is wat Bagman te sê het nie. Hy kon Harry tog voor Ron en Hermien gelukgewens het. Dit lyk egter nie asof Bagman besonder haastig is om met die mandjie patats vorendag te kom nie. Harry sien hoe hy in die spieël na die gnome loer wat almal in doodse stilte deur hul donker skrefiesoë na hom en Harry sit en kyk.

"'n Absolute nagmerrie," sê Bagman onderlangs vir Harry toe hy sien dat Harry ook na die gnome kyk. "Hul Engels is regtig beroerd . . . dis soos om terug tussen al daardie Bulgare by die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker te wees . . . maar ten minste gebruik hulle gebaretaal wat 'n gewone mens kan verstaan. Hierdie klomp babbel die hele tyd in Twakenbog . . . en ek ken net een Twakenbog-woord. *Bladvak*. Dit beteken 'pik'. Ek hou nie daarvan om dit te sê nie, netnou dink hulle ek probeer hulle dreig." Hy uiter 'n kort, bulderende lag.

"Wat wil hulle hê?" vra Harry wat oplet dat die gnome Bagman nog steeds fyn dophou.

"H'm – wel . . ." sê Bagman wat skielik senuagtig lyk. "Hulle . . . h'm . . . hulle soek vir Barty Crouch."

"Hoekom soek hulle hom hier?" vra Harry. "Is hy dan nie by die Ministerie in Londen nie?"

“H’m . . . om die waarheid te sê, ek het nie ’n idee waar hy is nie,” sê Bagman. “Hy’t soort van . . . opgehou om werk toe te kom. Is al weke lank afwesig. Jong Percy, sy assistent, beweer dat hy siek is. Skynbaar stuur hy instruksies per uil. Sal jy omgee om niks hieroor vir enigiemand te sê nie, Harry? Rika Skinner snuffel nog altyd oral rond en ek wed sy sal Barty se siekte so opblaas dat dit heeltemal sinister klink. Sal waarskynlik sê dat hy net soos Bertha Jurgens verdwyn het.”

“Het julle al enigiets van Bertha Jurgens gehoor?” vra Harry.

“Nee,” sê Bagman en hy lyk van voor af gespanne. “Ek het natuurlik niks wat soek . . .” (Omtrent tyd, dink Harry) “en dis alles baie eienaardig. Sy het beslis in Albanië aangekom, want sy het ’n kleinniggie daar ontmoet. En toe sy by die kleinniggie se huis weg is suide toe om by ’n tante te gaan kuier . . . het sy op pad soontoe spoorloos verdwyn. Het nie ’n idee waar sy kan wees nie . . . sy lyk byvoorbeeld nie na die tipe wat met ’n man sal wegloup nie, maar nogtans . . . maar wat doen ons, om sowaar oor gnome en Bertha Jurgens te sit en praat? Wat ek jou eintlik wou vra,” sy stem sak, “is hoe jy met jou goue eier vorder?”

“H’m . . . heeltemal oukei,” jok Harry.

Dit lyk asof Bagman weet dat hy nie eerlik is nie.

“Luister, Harry,” sê hy (nog steeds in ’n lae stem), “ek voel baie sleg oor alles . . . dat jy so in die Toernooi beland het, nie vrywillig deelneem nie . . . en” (sy stem is nou so sag dat Harry moet nader leun om hom te kan hoor) “. . . as daar hoegenaamd iets is wat ek kan doen om te help . . . ’n stoot in die regte rigting . . . ek het van jou begin hou . . . die manier hoe jy verby daardie draak gekom het! . . . Wel, sê net die woord.”

Harry kyk op in Bagman se ronde, rosige gesig en groot babablou oë.

“Ons moet die leidrade eintlik self uitwerk, nie waar nie?” sê hy en probeer sy stem ongeërg hou sodat dit nie klink asof hy die Hoof van die Departement van Magiese Sport en Ontspanning daarvan wil beskuldig dat hy die reëls oortree nie.

“Wel . . . wel, ja,” sê Bagman ongeduldig, “maar – komaan, Harry – ons wil tog almal hê dat Hogwarts moet wen, nê?”

“Het u vir Cedric ook hulp aangebied?” vra Harry.

’n Klein fronsie kreukel Bagman se gladde gesig.

“Nee, ek het nie,” sê hy. “Ek – wel, soos ek sê, ek hou van jou. Het gedink ek sal aanbied om jou . . .”

“Wel, dankie,” sê Harry, “maar ek dink ek is amper daar met daardie eier . . . net nog ’n paar dae en dis opgelos.”

Hy weet nie eintlik hoekom hy Bagman se hulp weier nie, behalwe dat hy Bagman skaars ken en dat dit meer na ’n verneukspul voel om sy hulp te aanvaar as wanneer hy vir Ron, Hermien of Sirius raad vra.

Bagman lyk so ietwat in die gesig gevat, maar hy kan niks verder sê nie, want op hierdie oomblik daag Fred en George ook op.

“Hallo, mnr. Bagman,” sê Fred hartlik. “Kan ons vir u iets koop om te drink?”

“E . . . nee,” sê Bagman terwyl hy vir oulaas gekrenk na Harry kyk, “nee dankie, seuns . . .”

Fred en George lyk net so teleurgesteld soos Bagman, wat nog na Harry staar asof hy hom sleg in die steek gelaat het.

“Wel, ek moet spore maak,” sê hy. “Gaaf om julle almal te sien. Sterkte, Harry.”

Hy gaan haastig by die kroeg uit. Die gnome glip ook van hul stoele af en sit hom agterna. Harry gaan sluit weer by Ron en Hermien aan.

“Wat wou hy hê?” sê Ron die oomblik toe Harry gaan sit.

“Hy’t aangebied om my met die goue eier te help,” sê Harry.

“Hy mag dit nie doen nie!” sê Hermien wat baie geskok lyk. “Hy’s een van die beoordelaars! En in elk geval, jy’t dit alreeds uitgewerk – nie waar nie?”

“E . . . amper,” sê Harry.

“Wel, ek dink nie Dompeldorius sal daarvan hou as hy moet weet dat Bagman jou probeer oorreed om te kul nie!” sê Hermien wat nog steeds baie afkeurend lyk. “Ek hoop hy probeer net so hard om vir Cedric te help!”

“Hy probeer nie. Ek het gevra,” sê Harry.

“Wat maak dit tog saak of Diggory hulp kry of nie?” sê Ron en Harry moet heimlik saamstem.

“Daardie gnome het nie juis vriendelik gelyk nie,” sê Hermien terwyl sy ’n slukkie van haar Botterbier vat. “Wat maak hulle hier?”

“Volgens Bagman soek hulle vir Crouch,” sê Harry. “Hy’s nog steeds siek. Is nie by die werk nie.”

“Dalk is Percy besig om hom te vergiftig,” sê Ron. “Dalk dink hy dat hy Hoof van die Departement vir Internasionale Magiese Samewerking sal word as Crouch sou omkap.”

Hermien gee vir Ron ’n moenie-oor-sulke-goed-grappies-maak-nie-kyk en sê, “Snaaks dat die gnome vir mnr. Crouch soek . . . hulle onderhandel gewoonlik met die Departement vir die Regulering en Beheer van Magiese Kreature.”

“Crouch kan ’n klomp verskillende tale praat,” sê Harry. “Dalk het hulle ’n tolk nodig.”

“So nou bekommer jy jou oor die arme klein gnoompies, hê?” vra Ron vir Hermien. “Jy wil nou seker iets soos G.A.G. begin? Genootskap vir die beskerming van Aaklige Gnome?”

“Ha, ha, ha,” sê Hermien sarkasties. “Gnome het nie beskerming nodig nie. Luister jy dan nie as professor Binns vir ons van die gnoom-rebellies vertel nie?”

“Nee,” sê Harry en Ron gelyk.

“Wel, hulle is heeltemal daartoe in staat om hul man teen towenaars te staan,” sê Hermien terwyl sy nog ’n slukkie Botterbier vat. “Hulle is baie slim. Hulle is nie soos huiselwe wat nie vir hulself opkom nie.”

“O, gaats,” sê Ron en staar na die deur.

Rika Skinner het so pas ingekom. Sy het ’n piesanggeel kleed aan; haar nels is skokpienk geverf en die fotograaf met die bierpens is aan haar sy. Sy koop ’n paar drankies en toe beur sy en die fotograaf deur die mense na ’n tafel daar naby. Toe sy nader kom, gluur Harry, Ron en Hermien haar aan. Sy praat vinnig en dit lyk asof sy baie in haar skik is met iets.

“... het nie juis gretig gelyk om met ons te praat nie, nè, Bozo? Hoekom is dit, dink jy? En hoekom is daar ’n hele string gnome agter hom aan? Wys hom glo die besienswaardighede... watter onsin... hy was nog altyd ’n swak leuenaar. Dink jy daar’s iets aan die gang? Sal ons ’n bietjie rondsnuffel? *Korrupte voormalige Hoof van Magiese Sport en Ontspanning*, Ludo Bagman... lekker pittige aanhef, of hoe, Bozo – ons kort net ’n storie om daarby te pas –”

“Nog ’n lewe wat jy wil vernietig, hè?” sê Harry hardop.

’n Paar mense kyk om. Rika Skinner se oë rek agter haar met juwele versierde brilglase toe sy sien wie dit is wat gepraat het.

“Harry!” sê sy stralend. “Wonderlik! Hoekom kom sit jy nie hier by ons –”

“Ek sal nie met ’n tien meter-besemstok naby jou kom nie,” sê Harry woedend. “Hoekom het jy dit aan Hagrid gedoen, hè?”

Rika Skinner lig haar donker ingetekende wenkbroue.

“Ons lesers het die reg om die waarheid te weet, Harry, ek doen slegs my –”

“Wat maak dit saak dat hy ’n halfreus is?” skreeu Harry. “Daar’s niks met hom verkeerd nie!”

Die hele kroeg het baie stil geword. Madame Rosmerta agter die toonbank staar strak voor haar uit en dit lyk asof sy glad nie agterkom dat die fles wat sy vol heuningbier skink, oorloop nie.

Rika Skinner se glimlag flikker baie effens, maar sy ruk haarself feitlik onmiddellik reg, maak haar krokodilvelhandsak oop, haal haar Kitskrabbelveerpen uit en sê, “Wat van ’n onderhoud met my oor die Hagrid wat jy ken, Harry? Die man agter die spiere? Jul onwaarskynlike vriendskap en die redes daarvoor? Beskou jy hom dalk as ’n soort substituut-vaderfiguur?”

Hermien staan baie vinnig op; haar Botterbier is geklem in haar hand asof dit ’n handgranaat is.

“Jou walglike vroumens,” sê sy deur haar tande, “jy gee niks vir iemand om nie, nè, jy sal enigiets doen vir ’n storie oor enigiemand, tot Ludo Bagman –”

“Loop sit, jou verspotte klein dogtertjie, en moenie oor goed praat wat jy nie verstaan nie,” sê Rika Skinner kil en haar oë word hard toe hulle op Hermien rus. “Ek weet goed oor Ludo Bagman wat jou hare sal laat rys . . . Nie dat dit nodig is nie –” voeg sy by terwyl sy na Hermien se bossiekop staar.

“Kom ons loop,” sê Hermien. “Komaan, Harry – Ron . . .”

Toe hulle uitstap, is daar ’n klomp mense wat hulle agterna kyk. Harry gaan in die deur staan om terug te kyk. Rika Skinner se Kitskrabbelveerpen is besig om heen en weer oor ’n stuk perkament wat op die tafel lê, te rits.

“Jy is volgende op haar lys, Hermien,” sê Ron in ’n lae, bekommerde stem toe hulle vinnig in die straat terugstap.

“Laat haar net!” sê Hermien skril; sy bewee van woede. “Ek sal haar wys! Verspotte klein dogtertjie nogal! O, hiervoor sal ek haar kry, eers Harry, toe Hagrid . . .”

“Jy moes nie vir Rika Skinner ontstel het nie,” sê Ron senuagtig. “Ek is ernstig, Hermien, sy sal iets oor jou uitgrawe –”

“My ouers lees nie die *Daaglikse Profeet* nie en ek weier om weg te kruip!” sê Hermien wat nou so vinnig loop dat Harry en Ron moet uithaal om by te hou. Die laaste keer toe Harry vir Hermien so kwaad sien lyk het, het sy vir Draco Malfoy deur die gesig geklap. “En Hagrid gaan ook nie meer wegkruip nie! Hy moes *nooit* dat daardie verskoning vir ’n mens hom so omgekrap het nie. Maak gou!”

Sy begin hardloop en lei hulle die hele ent pad terug, deur die poorte met die gevleuelde wildevarke en oor die terrein tot by Hagrid se hut.

“Hagrid!” skreeu Hermien terwyl sy teen sy voordeur hamer. “Hagrid, dis genoeg! Ons weet jy’s daar binne! Niemand gee om dat jou ma ’n reus is nie, Hagrid! Moenie dat daardie vieslike Skinner-vroumens dit aan jou doen nie! Hagrid, kom uit, jy’s nou regtig –”

Die deur gaan oop. Hermien sê, “Omtrent t–!”: en steek dan baie skielik vas, want sy staan van aangesig tot aangesig, nie met Hagrid nie, maar met Albus Dompeldorius.

“Goeiemiddag,” sê hy vriendelik en glimlag af na hulle.

“Ons – h’m – ons het vir Hagrid kom sien,” sê Hermien in ’n klein stemmetjie.

“Ja, ek het so afgelei,” sê Dompeldorius en sy oë vonkel. “Hoekom kom julle nie in nie?”

“O . . . h’m . . . oukei,” sê Hermien.

Sy, Ron en Harry gaan in; Tande bespring vir Harry die oomblik toe hy hom sien. Hy blaf oorverdowend en probeer om Harry se ore te lek. Harry weer vir Tande af en kyk om hom rond.

Hagrid sit by sy tafel waarop twee groot bekere staan. Hy lyk verskriklik. Sy gesig is vol vlekke, sy oë is geswel en sy hare is nou die ander

uitste. Waar hy dit eers probeer platsmeer het, lyk dit nou soos 'n pruik van gekoekte drade.

"Hallo, Hagrid," sê Harry.

Hagrid kyk op.

"Allo," sê hy in 'n baie hees stem.

"Nog tee, dink ek," sê Dompeldorius toe hy die deur agter Harry, Ron en Hermien toemaak, sy towerstaf uithaal en dit ronddraai. 'n Skinkbord verskyn tollend in die lug, tesame met 'n lekker bord koek. Dompeldorius toor die skinkbord tot op die tafel en almal gaan sit. Daar is 'n effense stilte en toe sê Dompeldorius, "Het jy dalk gehoor wat juffrou La Grange geskreeu het, Hagrid?"

Hermien word effens pienk, maar Dompeldorius glimlag vir haar en gaan voort, "Te oordeel na die manier waarop hulle probeer het om jou deur af te breek, lyk dit asof Hermien, Harry en Ron nog steeds met jou vriende wil wees."

"Natuurlik wil ons nog met jou vriende wees!" sê Harry terwyl hy na Hagrid staar. "Jy dink tog nie dat daardie Skinnerkoei – jammer, professor," voeg hy vinnig by terwyl hy na Dompeldorius loer.

"Ek het tydelik doof geword en weet glad nie wat jy gesê het nie, Harry," sê Dompeldorius wat sy duime draai en na die plafon staar.

"H'm – goed," sê Harry verleë. "Ek het net bedoel dat – Hagrid, hoe kon jy gedink het dat ons hoegenaamd sal omgee wat daardie – vroumens – oor jou skryf?"

Twee groot trane glip uit Hagrid se kewerswart oë en drup stadig tot in sy gekoekte baard.

"Spreekende bewyse van wat ek vir jou gesê het, Hagrid," sê Dompeldorius wat nog steeds aandagtig na die plafon staar. "Ek het vir jou die briewe van talle ouers gewys wat jou onthou van die dae dat hulle self hier was en wat my in geen onsekere terme laat verstaan het dat as ek jou sou afdank hulle iets daaroor te sê sal hê –"

"Nie almal nie," sê Hagrid hees. "Nie almal wil hê dat ek moet bly nie."

"Regtig, Hagrid, as jy verwag dat die hele wêreld van jou moet hou, sal jy 'n baie lang tyd in hierdie hut moet bly," sê Dompeldorius wat nou streng oor sy halfmaanbrilglase tuur. "Sedert ek skoolhoof van Hogwarts is, het nog nie een week verbygegaan waarin ek nie ten minste een uil gehad het van mense wat kla oor die manier waarop ek die skool bestuur nie. Wat moet ek doen? Myself in my kantoor toesluit en weier om met enigiemand te praat?"

"Jy – jy's nie 'n halfreus nie!" sê Hagrid skor.

"Hagrid, kyk net watse familie het ek!" sê Harry woedend. "Kyk na die Dursleys!"

"'n Uitstekende punt," sê professor Dompeldorius. "My eie broer,

Aberforth, is vervolg vir die beoefening van ongewenste towerspreuke op 'n bok. Dit was in al die koerante, maar het Aberforth weggekruipt? Nie hy nie! Hy't sy kop hoog gehou en soos altyd met sy sake voortgegaan. Ek is natuurlik nie oortuig dat hy wel kan lees nie, dus weet ek nie of dit werklik heldhaftigheid was . . ."

"Kom terug en gee klas, Hagrid," sê Hermien sag, "kom asseblief terug, ons mis jou baie."

Hagrid sluk. Nog trane loop oor sy wange tot in sy gekoekte baard. Dompeldorius staan op.

"Ek weier om jou bedanking te aanvaar, Hagrid, en ek verwag jou Maandag terug by die werk," sê hy. "Jy sal om halfnege saam met my ontbyt in die Groot Saal eet. Geen verskonings sal aanvaar word nie. Tot siens, julle almal."

Toe Dompeldorius die hut verlaat, talm hy net lank genoeg om Tande se ore te krap. Toe die deur agter hom toegaan, begin Hagrid om in sy hande, wat so groot soos vullisdeksels is, te huil. Hermien tik sy arm aanhoudend tot Hagrid uiteindelik, met oë wat besonder rooi is, opkyk en sê, "Groot man, Dompeldorius . . . groot man . . ."

"Ja, hy is," sê Ron. "Kan ek maar van hierdie koekies kry, Hagrid?"

"Help julleselewers," sê Hagrid terwyl hy sy oë met die agterkant van sy hand afvee. "A, ja, hy's reg, 'tuurlik – julle is almal reg . . . ek was simpel . . . my ou vader sou hom geskaam het oor hoe ek aangaan . . ." Nog trane kom, maar hy vee hulle met heelwat meer mening af en sê, "Het nog nooit eens 'n foto van my pa vir julle gewys nie, het ek? Kyk . . ."

Hagrid staan op, stap na die kombuiskas, maak 'n laai oop en haal 'n foto uit van 'n korterige towenaar met Hagrid se swart oë wat stralend op Hagrid se skouer sit. Te oordeel na die appelboom langs hom is Hagrid 'n goeie twee en 'n half meter lank, maar sy gesig is baardloos, jonk, rond en glad – hy lyk nie ouer as elf nie.

"Dis geneem net na ek Hogwarts toe is," sê Hagrid skor. "Pa was so in sy skik . . . het gedink dat ek dalk nie 'n towenaar is nie, sien, oor my ma . . . wel, hoe dan ook. 'Tuurlik was ek nooit baie goed met toor nie . . . maar ten minste was hy nie daar toe ek geskors is nie. Is dood in my tweede jaar, sien . . ."

"Dompeldorius was die een wat vir my opgekom het na Pa se dood. Het die werk as boswagter vir my gereël . . . vertrou mense, sien. Gee vir hulle tweede kanse . . . dis wat hom anders as al die ander hoofde maak. Hy sal enigteen by Hogwarts aanvaar mits hulle talent het. Weet mense kan heel oukei uitdraai selfs al is hul familie nie . . . wel, altyd so respektabel nie. Maar daar is diegene wat dit nie verstaan nie. Daar's altyd diegene wat dit teen jou hou . . . diegene wat maak asof hulle groot gebou is eerder as om op te staan en te sê – ek is wat ek is en ek is nie daarvoor skaam nie. 'Moet nooit skaam wees nie,' het my oukêrel altyd gesê, 'daar's

die mense wat dit teen jou sal hou, maar dis dit nie werd om met hulle te bodder nie.' En hy was reg. Ek was 'n regte swaap. Ek gaan ook nie meer met haar bodder nie, dit belowe ek julle. Groot gebou, nogal . . ."

Harry, Ron en Hermien loer senuagtig na mekaar; Harry sal eerder met vyftig Spuitstertkrewels gaan stap voor hy aan Hagrid sal erken dat hy gehoor het wat hy vir Madame Maxine gesê het, maar Hagrid praat nog eenstryk deur en dit lyk asof hy salig onbewus is daarvan dat hy hoege-naamd iets vreemds gesê het.

"Weet jy wat, Harry?" sê hy toe hy met blink oë van die foto van sy pa af opkyk. "Toe ek jou die eerste keer gesien het, het jy my 'n bietjie aan myself laat dink. Ma en Pa weg en jy't gedink jy sal nie by Hogwarts inpas nie, onthou jy? Was nie seker dat jy dit regtig sal kan doen nie . . . en kyk nou vir jou, Harry! Skoolkampioen!"

Hy kyk 'n oomblik na Harry en toe sê hy baie ernstig, "Weet jy waarvan sal ek hou, Harry? Ek sal daarvan hou as jy wen, ek sal regtig. Dit sal hulle almal wys . . . dat 'n mens nie 'n volbloed hoef te wees om iets reg te kry nie. Dat jy nie skaam hoef te wees vir wat jy is nie. Dit sal hulle wys dat Dompeldorius reg is om almal in te laat wat kan toor. Hoe kom jy met daardie eier reg, Harry?"

"Goed," sê Harry. "Regtig goed."

Hagrid se mistroostige gesig breek oop in 'n breë, sopperige glimlag. "Ditsem . . . jy sal hulle wys, Harry, jy sal hulle wys. Hulle almal uitstof."

Om vir Hagrid te lieg, is nie heeltemal soos om vir ander mense te lieg nie. Toe Harry later daardie middag saam met Ron en Hermien terug kas-teel toe stap, kan hy die beeld van die ekstatiëse uitdrukking op Hagrid se bebaarde gesig, toe hy hom voorgestel het hoe Harry die Toernooi wen, net nie afskud nie. Daardie aand lê die onverstaanbare eier swaarder as ooit op Harry se gemoed en teen die tyd dat hy bed toe gaan, het hy 'n besluit geneem – dit is tyd om sy trots te sluk en te kyk of Cedric se wenk iets werd is.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



THE EGG AND THE EYE

As Harry had no idea how long a bath he would need to work out the secret of the golden egg, he decided to do it at night, when he would be able to take as much time as he wanted. Reluctant though he was to accept more favors from Cedric, he also decided to use the prefects' bathroom; far fewer people were allowed in there, so it was much less likely that he would be disturbed.

Harry planned his excursion carefully, because he had been caught out of bed and out-of-bounds by Filch the caretaker in the middle of the night once before, and had no desire to repeat the experience. The

Invisibility Cloak would, of course, be essential, and as an added precaution, Harry thought he would take the Marauder's Map, which, next to the Cloak, was the most useful aid to rule-breaking Harry owned. The map showed the whole of Hogwarts, including its many shortcuts and secret passageways and, most important of all, it revealed the people inside the castle as minuscule, labeled dots, moving around the corridors, so that Harry would be forewarned if somebody was approaching the bathroom.

On Thursday night, Harry sneaked up to bed, put on the Cloak, crept back downstairs, and, just as he had done on the night when Hagrid had shown him the dragons, waited for the portrait hole to open. This time it was Ron who waited outside to give the Fat Lady the password ("banana fritters"). "Good luck," Ron muttered, climbing into the room as Harry crept out past him.

It was awkward moving under the Cloak tonight, because Harry had the heavy egg under one arm and the map held in front of his nose with the other. However, the moonlit corridors were empty and silent, and by checking the map at strategic intervals, Harry was able to ensure that he wouldn't run into anyone he wanted to avoid. When he reached the statue of Boris the Bewildered, a lost-looking wizard with his gloves on the wrong hands, he located the right door, leaned close to it, and muttered the password, "Pine fresh," just as Cedric had told him.

The door creaked open. Harry slipped inside, bolted the door behind him, and pulled off the Invisibility Cloak, looking around.

His immediate reaction was that it would be worth becoming a prefect just to be able to use this bathroom. It was softly lit by a

splendid candle-filled chandelier, and everything was made of white marble, including what looked like an empty, rectangular swimming pool sunk into the middle of the floor. About a hundred golden taps stood all around the pool's edges, each with a differently colored jewel set into its handle. There was also a diving board. Long white linen curtains hung at the windows; a large pile of fluffy white towels sat in a corner, and there was a single golden-framed painting on the wall. It featured a blonde mermaid who was fast asleep on a rock, her long hair over her face. It fluttered every time she snored.

Harry moved forward, looking around, his footsteps echoing off the walls. Magnificent though the bathroom was — and quite keen though he was to try out a few of those taps — now he was here he couldn't quite suppress the feeling that Cedric might have been having him on. How on earth was this supposed to help solve the mystery of the egg? Nevertheless, he put one of the fluffy towels, the Cloak, the map, and the egg at the side of the swimming-pool-sized bath, then knelt down and turned on a few of the taps.

He could tell at once that they carried different sorts of bubble bath mixed with the water, though it wasn't bubble bath as Harry had ever experienced it. One tap gushed pink and blue bubbles the size of footballs; another poured ice-white foam so thick that Harry thought it would have supported his weight if he'd cared to test it; a third sent heavily perfumed purple clouds hovering over the surface of the water. Harry amused himself for a while turning the taps on and off, particularly enjoying the effect of one whose jet bounced off the surface of the water in large arcs. Then, when the deep pool was full of hot water, foam, and bubbles, which took a very short time

considering its size, Harry turned off all the taps, pulled off his pajamas, slippers, and dressing gown, and slid into the water.

It was so deep that his feet barely touched the bottom, and he actually did a couple of lengths before swimming back to the side and treading water, staring at the egg. Highly enjoyable though it was to swim in hot and foamy water with clouds of different-colored steam wafting all around him, no stroke of brilliance came to him, no sudden burst of understanding.

Harry stretched out his arms, lifted the egg in his wet hands, and opened it. The wailing, screeching sound filled the bathroom, echoing and reverberating off the marble walls, but it sounded just as incomprehensible as ever, if not more so with all the echoes. He snapped it shut again, worried that the sound would attract Filch, wondering whether that hadn't been Cedric's plan — and then, making him jump so badly that he dropped the egg, which clattered away across the bathroom floor, someone spoke.

“I'd try putting it *in* the water, if I were you.”

Harry had swallowed a considerable amount of bubbles in shock. He stood up, sputtering, and saw the ghost of a very glum-looking girl sitting cross-legged on top of one of the taps. It was Moaning Myrtle, who was usually to be heard sobbing in the S-bend of a toilet three floors below.

“Myrtle!” Harry said in outrage, “I'm — I'm not wearing anything!”

The foam was so dense that this hardly mattered, but he had a nasty feeling that Myrtle had been spying on him from out of one of the taps ever since he had arrived.

"I closed my eyes when you got in," she said, blinking at him through her thick spectacles. "You haven't been to see me for *ages*."

"Yeah . . . well . . ." said Harry, bending his knees slightly, just to make absolutely sure Myrtle couldn't see anything but his head, "I'm not supposed to come into your bathroom, am I? It's a girls' one."

"You didn't used to care," said Myrtle miserably. "You used to be in there all the time."

This was true, though only because Harry, Ron, and Hermione had found Myrtle's out-of-order toilets a convenient place to brew Polyjuice Potion in secret — a forbidden potion that had turned him and Ron into living replicas of Crabbe and Goyle for an hour, so that they could sneak into the Slytherin common room.

"I got told off for going in there," said Harry, which was half-true; Percy had once caught him coming out of Myrtle's bathroom. "I thought I'd better not come back after that."

"Oh . . . I see . . ." said Myrtle, picking at a spot on her chin in a morose sort of way. "Well . . . anyway . . . I'd try the egg in the water. That's what Cedric Diggory did."

"Have you been spying on him too?" said Harry indignantly. "What d'you do, sneak up here in the evenings to watch the prefects take baths?"

"Sometimes," said Myrtle, rather slyly, "but I've never come out to speak to anyone before."

"I'm honored," said Harry darkly. "You keep your eyes shut!"

He made sure Myrtle had her glasses well covered before hoisting himself out of the bath, wrapping the towel firmly around his waist, and going to retrieve the egg. Once he was back in the water, Myrtle

peered through her fingers and said, “Go on, then . . . open it under the water!”

Harry lowered the egg beneath the foamy surface and opened it . . . and this time, it did not wail. A gurgling song was coming out of it, a song whose words he couldn’t distinguish through the water.

“You need to put your head under too,” said Myrtle, who seemed to be thoroughly enjoying bossing him around. “Go on!”

Harry took a great breath and slid under the surface — and now, sitting on the marble bottom of the bubble-filled bath, he heard a chorus of eerie voices singing to him from the open egg in his hands:

*“Come seek us where our voices sound,
We cannot sing above the ground,
And while you’re searching, ponder this:
We’ve taken what you’ll sorely miss,
An hour long you’ll have to look,
And to recover what we took,
But past an hour — the prospect’s black,
Too late, it’s gone, it won’t come back.”*

Harry let himself float back upward and broke the bubbly surface, shaking his hair out of his eyes.

“Hear it?” said Myrtle.

“Yeah . . . ‘Come seek us where our voices sound . . .’ and if I need persuading . . . hang on, I need to listen again . . .”

He sank back beneath the water. It took three more underwater renditions of the egg’s song before Harry had it memorized; then he trod water for a while, thinking hard, while Myrtle sat and watched

him.

“I’ve got to go and look for people who can’t use their voices above the ground. . . .” he said slowly. “Er . . . who could that be?”

“Slow, aren’t you?”

He had never seen Moaning Myrtle so cheerful, apart from the day when a dose of Polyjuice Potion had given Hermione the hairy face and tail of a cat. Harry stared around the bathroom, thinking . . . if the voices could only be heard underwater, then it made sense for them to belong to underwater creatures. He ran this theory past Myrtle, who smirked at him.

“Well, that’s what Diggory thought,” she said. “He lay there talking to himself for ages about it. Ages and ages . . . nearly all the bubbles had gone. . . .”

“Underwater . . .” Harry said slowly. “Myrtle . . . what lives in the lake, apart from the giant squid?”

“Oh all sorts,” she said. “I sometimes go down there . . . sometimes don’t have any choice, if someone flushes my toilet when I’m not expecting it. . . .”

Trying not to think about Moaning Myrtle zooming down a pipe to the lake with the contents of a toilet, Harry said, “Well, does anything in there have a human voice? Hang on —”

Harry’s eyes had fallen on the picture of the snoozing mermaid on the wall.

“Myrtle, there aren’t *merpeople* in there, are there?”

“Oooh, very good,” she said, her thick glasses twinkling, “it took Diggory much longer than that! And that was with *her* awake too” — Myrtle jerked her head toward the mermaid with an expression of

great dislike on her glum face — “giggling and showing off and flashing her fins. . . .”

“That’s it, isn’t it?” said Harry excitedly. “The second task’s to go and find the merpeople in the lake and . . . and . . .”

But he suddenly realized what he was saying, and he felt the excitement drain out of him as though someone had just pulled a plug in his stomach. He wasn’t a very good swimmer; he’d never had much practice. Dudley had had lessons in his youth, but Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon, no doubt hoping that Harry would drown one day, hadn’t bothered to give him any. A couple of lengths of this bath were all very well, but that lake was very large, and very deep . . . and merpeople would surely live right at the bottom. . . .

“Myrtle,” Harry said slowly, “how am I supposed to *breathe*?”

At this, Myrtle’s eyes filled with sudden tears again.

“Tactless!” she muttered, groping in her robes for a handkerchief.

“What’s tactless?” said Harry, bewildered.

“Talking about breathing in front of *me*!” she said shrilly, and her voice echoed loudly around the bathroom. “When I can’t . . . when I haven’t . . . not for ages . . .”

She buried her face in her handkerchief and sniffed loudly. Harry remembered how touchy Myrtle had always been about being dead, but none of the other ghosts he knew made such a fuss about it.

“Sorry,” he said impatiently. “I didn’t mean — I just forgot . . .”

“Oh yes, very easy to forget Myrtle’s dead,” said Myrtle, gulping, looking at him out of swollen eyes. “Nobody missed me even when I was alive. Took them hours and hours to find my body — I know, I was sitting there waiting for them. Olive Hornby came into the

bathroom — ‘Are you in here again, sulking, Myrtle?’ she said, ‘because Professor Dippet asked me to look for you —’ And then she saw my body . . . oooh, she didn’t forget it until her dying day, I made sure of that . . . followed her around and reminded her, I did. I remember at her brother’s wedding —”

But Harry wasn’t listening; he was thinking about the merpeople’s song again. “*We’ve taken what you’ll sorely miss.*” That sounded as though they were going to steal something of his, something he had to get back. What were they going to take?

“— and then, of course, she went to the Ministry of Magic to stop me stalking her, so I had to come back here and live in my toilet.”

“Good,” said Harry vaguely. “Well, I’m a lot further on than I was. . . . Shut your eyes again, will you? I’m getting out.”

He retrieved the egg from the bottom of the bath, climbed out, dried himself, and pulled on his pajamas and dressing gown again.

“Will you come and visit me in my bathroom again sometime?” Moaning Myrtle asked mournfully as Harry picked up the Invisibility Cloak.

“Er . . . I’ll try,” Harry said, though privately thinking the only way he’d be visiting Myrtle’s bathroom again was if every other toilet in the castle got blocked. “See you, Myrtle . . . thanks for your help.”

“Bye, ’bye,” she said gloomily, and as Harry put on the Invisibility Cloak he saw her zoom back up the tap.

Out in the dark corridor, Harry examined the Marauder’s Map to check that the coast was still clear. Yes, the dots belonging to Filch and his cat, Mrs. Norris, were safely in their office . . . nothing else seemed to be moving apart from Peeves, though he was bouncing

around the trophy room on the floor above. . . . Harry had taken his first step back toward Gryffindor Tower when something else on the map caught his eye . . . something distinctly odd.

Peeves was *not* the only thing that was moving. A single dot was flitting around a room in the bottom left-hand corner — Snape’s office. But the dot wasn’t labeled “Severus Snape” . . . it was Bartemius Crouch.

Harry stared at the dot. Mr. Crouch was supposed to be too ill to go to work or to come to the Yule Ball — so what was he doing, sneaking into Hogwarts at one o’clock in the morning? Harry watched closely as the dot moved around and around the room, pausing here and there. . . .

Harry hesitated, thinking . . . and then his curiosity got the better of him. He turned and set off in the opposite direction toward the nearest staircase. He was going to see what Crouch was up to.

Harry walked down the stairs as quietly as possible, though the faces in some of the portraits still turned curiously at the squeak of a floorboard, the rustle of his pajamas. He crept along the corridor below, pushed aside a tapestry about halfway along, and proceeded down a narrower staircase, a shortcut that would take him down two floors. He kept glancing down at the map, wondering . . . It just didn’t seem in character, somehow, for correct, law-abiding Mr. Crouch to be sneaking around somebody else’s office this late at night. . . .

And then, halfway down the staircase, not thinking about what he was doing, not concentrating on anything but the peculiar behavior of Mr. Crouch, Harry’s leg suddenly sank right through the trick step Neville always forgot to jump. He gave an ungainly wobble, and the

golden egg, still damp from the bath, slipped from under his arm. He lurched forward to try and catch it, but too late; the egg fell down the long staircase with a bang as loud as a bass drum on every step — the Invisibility Cloak slipped — Harry snatched at it, and the Marauder's Map fluttered out of his hand and slid down six stairs, where, sunk in the step to above his knee, he couldn't reach it.

The golden egg fell through the tapestry at the bottom of the staircase, burst open, and began wailing loudly in the corridor below. Harry pulled out his wand and struggled to touch the Marauder's Map, to wipe it blank, but it was too far away to reach —

Pulling the Cloak back over himself, Harry straightened up, listening hard with his eyes screwed up with fear . . . and, almost immediately —

“PEEVES!”

It was the unmistakable hunting cry of Filch the caretaker. Harry could hear his rapid, shuffling footsteps coming nearer and nearer, his wheezy voice raised in fury.

“What's this racket? Wake up the whole castle, will you? I'll have you, Peeves, I'll have you, you'll . . . and what is this?”

Filch's footsteps halted; there was a clink of metal on metal and the wailing stopped — Filch had picked up the egg and closed it. Harry stood very still, one leg still jammed tightly in the magical step, listening. Any moment now, Filch was going to pull aside the tapestry, expecting to see Peeves . . . and there would be no Peeves . . . but if he came up the stairs, he would spot the Marauder's Map . . . and Invisibility Cloak or not, the map would show “Harry

Potter” standing exactly where he was.

“Egg?” Filch said quietly at the foot of the stairs. “My sweet!” — Mrs. Norris was obviously with him — “This is a Triwizard clue! This belongs to a school champion!”

Harry felt sick; his heart was hammering very fast —

“PEEVES!” Filch roared gleefully. “You’ve been stealing!”

He ripped back the tapestry below, and Harry saw his horrible, pouchy face and bulging, pale eyes staring up the dark and (to Filch) deserted staircase.

“Hiding, are you?” he said softly. “I’m coming to get you, Peeves. . . . You’ve gone and stolen a Triwizard clue, Peeves. . . . Dumbledore’ll have you out of here for this, you filthy, pilfering poltergeist. . . .”

Filch started to climb the stairs, his scrawny, dust-colored cat at his heels. Mrs. Norris’s lamp-like eyes, so very like her master’s, were fixed directly upon Harry. He had had occasion before now to wonder whether the Invisibility Cloak worked on cats. . . . Sick with apprehension, he watched Filch drawing nearer and nearer in his old flannel dressing gown — he tried desperately to pull his trapped leg free, but it merely sank a few more inches — any second now, Filch was going to spot the map or walk right into him —

“Filch? What’s going on?”

Filch stopped a few steps below Harry and turned. At the foot of the stairs stood the only person who could make Harry’s situation worse: Snape. He was wearing a long gray nightshirt and he looked livid.

“It’s Peeves, Professor,” Filch whispered malevolently. “He threw

this egg down the stairs.”

Snape climbed up the stairs quickly and stopped beside Filch. Harry gritted his teeth, convinced his loudly thumping heart would give him away at any second. . . .

“Peeves?” said Snape softly, staring at the egg in Filch’s hands. “But Peeves couldn’t get into my office. . . .”

“This egg was in your office, Professor?”

“Of course not,” Snape snapped. “I heard banging and wailing —”

“Yes, Professor, that was the egg —”

“— I was coming to investigate —”

“— Peeves threw it, Professor —”

“— and when I passed my office, I saw that the torches were lit and a cupboard door was ajar! Somebody has been searching it!”

“But Peeves couldn’t —”

“I know he couldn’t, Filch!” Snape snapped again. “I seal my office with a spell none but a wizard could break!” Snape looked up the stairs, straight through Harry, and then down into the corridor below. “I want you to come and help me search for the intruder, Filch.”

“I — yes, Professor — but —”

Filch looked yearningly up the stairs, right through Harry, who could see that he was very reluctant to forgo the chance of cornering Peeves. *Go*, Harry pleaded with him silently, *go with Snape . . . go . . .* Mrs. Norris was peering around Filch’s legs. . . . Harry had the distinct impression that she could smell him. . . . Why had he filled that bath with so much perfumed foam?

“The thing is, Professor,” said Filch plaintively, “the headmaster

will have to listen to me this time. Peeves has been stealing from a student, it might be my chance to get him thrown out of the castle once and for all —”

“Filch, I don’t give a damn about that wretched poltergeist; it’s my office that’s —”

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk.

Snape stopped talking very abruptly. He and Filch both looked down at the foot of the stairs. Harry saw Mad-Eye Moody limp into sight through the narrow gap between their heads. Moody was wearing his old traveling cloak over his nightshirt and leaning on his staff as usual.

“Pajama party, is it?” he growled up the stairs.

“Professor Snape and I heard noises, Professor,” said Filch at once. “Peeves the Poltergeist, throwing things around as usual — and then Professor Snape discovered that someone had broken into his off —”

“Shut up!” Snape hissed to Filch.

Moody took a step closer to the foot of the stairs. Harry saw Moody’s magical eye travel over Snape, and then, unmistakably, onto himself.

Harry’s heart gave a horrible jolt. *Moody could see through Invisibility Cloaks* . . . he alone could see the full strangeness of the scene: Snape in his nightshirt, Filch clutching the egg, and he, Harry, trapped in the stairs behind them. Moody’s lopsided gash of a mouth opened in surprise. For a few seconds, he and Harry stared straight into each other’s eyes. Then Moody closed his mouth and turned his blue eye upon Snape again.

“Did I hear that correctly, Snape?” he asked slowly. “Someone broke into your office?”

“It is unimportant,” said Snape coldly.

“On the contrary,” growled Moody, “it is very important. Who’d want to break into your office?”

“A student, I daresay,” said Snape. Harry could see a vein flickering horribly on Snape’s greasy temple. “It has happened before. Potion ingredients have gone missing from my private store cupboard . . . students attempting illicit mixtures, no doubt. . . .”

“Reckon they were after potion ingredients, eh?” said Moody. “Not hiding anything else in your office, are you?”

Harry saw the edge of Snape’s sallow face turn a nasty brick color, the vein in his temple pulsing more rapidly.

“You know I’m hiding nothing, Moody,” he said in a soft and dangerous voice, “as you’ve searched my office pretty thoroughly yourself.”

Moody’s face twisted into a smile. “Auror’s privilege, Snape. Dumbledore told me to keep an eye —”

“Dumbledore happens to trust me,” said Snape through clenched teeth. “I refuse to believe that he gave you orders to search my office!”

“Course Dumbledore trusts you,” growled Moody. “He’s a trusting man, isn’t he? Believes in second chances. But me — I say there are spots that don’t come off, Snape. Spots that never come off, d’you know what I mean?”

Snape suddenly did something very strange. He seized his left forearm convulsively with his right hand, as though something on it

had hurt him.

Moody laughed. "Get back to bed, Snape."

"You don't have the authority to send me anywhere!" Snape hissed, letting go of his arm as though angry with himself. "I have as much right to prowl this school after dark as you do!"

"Prowl away," said Moody, but his voice was full of menace. "I look forward to meeting you in a dark corridor some time. . . . You've dropped something, by the way. . . ."

With a stab of horror, Harry saw Moody point at the Marauder's Map, still lying on the staircase six steps below him. As Snape and Filch both turned to look at it, Harry threw caution to the winds; he raised his arms under the Cloak and waved furiously at Moody to attract his attention, mouthing "It's mine! *Mine!*"

Snape had reached out for it, a horrible expression of dawning comprehension on his face —

"Accio Parchment!"

The map flew up into the air, slipped through Snape's outstretched fingers, and soared down the stairs into Moody's hand.

"My mistake," Moody said calmly. "It's mine — must've dropped it earlier —"

But Snape's black eyes were darting from the egg in Filch's arms to the map in Moody's hand, and Harry could tell he was putting two and two together, as only Snape could. . . .

"Potter," he said quietly.

"What's that?" said Moody calmly, folding up the map and pocketing it.

"Potter!" Snape snarled, and he actually turned his head and stared

right at the place where Harry was, as though he could suddenly see him. “That egg is Potter’s egg. That piece of parchment belongs to Potter. I have seen it before, I recognize it! Potter is here! Potter, in his Invisibility Cloak!”

Snape stretched out his hands like a blind man and began to move up the stairs; Harry could have sworn his over-large nostrils were dilating, trying to sniff Harry out — trapped, Harry leaned backward, trying to avoid Snape’s fingertips, but any moment now —

“There’s nothing there, Snape!” barked Moody, “but I’ll be happy to tell the headmaster how quickly your mind jumped to Harry Potter!”

“Meaning what?” Snape turned again to look at Moody, his hands still outstretched, inches from Harry’s chest.

“Meaning that Dumbledore’s very interested to know who’s got it in for that boy!” said Moody, limping nearer still to the foot of the stairs. “And so am I, Snape . . . very interested. . . .” The torchlight flickered across his mangled face, so that the scars, and the chunk missing from his nose, looked deeper and darker than ever.

Snape was looking down at Moody, and Harry couldn’t see the expression on his face. For a moment, nobody moved or said anything. Then Snape slowly lowered his hands.

“I merely thought,” said Snape, in a voice of forced calm, “that if Potter was wandering around after hours again . . . it’s an unfortunate habit of his . . . he should be stopped. For — for his own safety.”

“Ah, I see,” said Moody softly. “Got Potter’s best interests at heart, have you?”

There was a pause. Snape and Moody were still staring at each

other. Mrs. Norris gave a loud meow, still peering around Filch's legs, looking for the source of Harry's bubble-bath smell.

"I think I will go back to bed," Snape said curtly.

"Best idea you've had all night," said Moody. "Now, Filch, if you'll just give me that egg —"

"No!" said Filch, clutching the egg as though it were his firstborn son. "Professor Moody, this is evidence of Peeves' treachery!"

"It's the property of the champion he stole it from," said Moody. "Hand it over, now."

Snape swept downstairs and passed Moody without another word. Filch made a chirruping noise to Mrs. Norris, who stared blankly at Harry for a few more seconds before turning and following her master. Still breathing very fast, Harry heard Snape walking away down the corridor; Filch handed Moody the egg and disappeared from view too, muttering to Mrs. Norris. "Never mind, my sweet . . . we'll see Dumbledore in the morning . . . tell him what Peeves was up to. . . ."

A door slammed. Harry was left staring down at Moody, who placed his staff on the bottommost stair and started to climb laboriously toward him, a dull *clunk* on every other step.

"Close shave, Potter," he muttered.

"Yeah . . . I — er . . . thanks," said Harry weakly.

"What is this thing?" said Moody, drawing the Marauder's Map out of his pocket and unfolding it.

"Map of Hogwarts," said Harry, hoping Moody was going to pull him out of the staircase soon; his leg was really hurting him.

"Merlin's beard," Moody whispered, staring at the map, his

magical eye going haywire. “This . . . this is some map, Potter!”

“Yeah, it’s . . . quite useful,” Harry said. His eyes were starting to water from the pain. “Er — Professor Moody, d’you think you could help me — ?”

“What? Oh! Yes . . . yes, of course . . .”

Moody took hold of Harry’s arms and pulled; Harry’s leg came free of the trick step, and he climbed onto the one above it. Moody was still gazing at the map.

“Potter . . .” he said slowly, “you didn’t happen, by any chance, to see who broke into Snape’s office, did you? On this map, I mean?”

“Er . . . yeah, I did . . .” Harry admitted. “It was Mr. Crouch.”

Moody’s magical eye whizzed over the entire surface of the map. He looked suddenly alarmed.

“Crouch?” he said. “You’re — you’re sure, Potter?”

“Positive,” said Harry.

“Well, he’s not here anymore,” said Moody, his eye still whizzing over the map. “Crouch . . . that’s very — very interesting. . . .”

He said nothing for almost a minute, still staring at the map. Harry could tell that this news meant something to Moody and very much wanted to know what it was. He wondered whether he dared ask. Moody scared him slightly . . . yet Moody had just helped him avoid an awful lot of trouble. . . .

“Er . . . Professor Moody . . . why d’you reckon Mr. Crouch wanted to look around Snape’s office?”

Moody’s magical eye left the map and fixed, quivering, upon Harry. It was a penetrating glare, and Harry had the impression that Moody was sizing him up, wondering whether to answer or not, or

how much to tell him.

“Put it this way, Potter,” Moody muttered finally, “they say old Mad-Eye’s obsessed with catching Dark wizards . . . but I’m nothing — *nothing* — compared to Barty Crouch.”

He continued to stare at the map. Harry was burning to know more.

“Professor Moody?” he said again. “D’you think . . . could this have anything to do with . . . maybe Mr. Crouch thinks there’s something going on. . . .”

“Like what?” said Moody sharply.

Harry wondered how much he dare say. He didn’t want Moody to guess that he had a source of information outside Hogwarts; that might lead to tricky questions about Sirius.

“I don’t know,” Harry muttered, “odd stuff’s been happening lately, hasn’t it? It’s been in the *Daily Prophet* . . . the Dark Mark at the World Cup, and the Death Eaters and everything. . . .”

Both of Moody’s mismatched eyes widened.

“You’re a sharp boy, Potter,” he said. His magical eye roved back to the Marauder’s Map. “Crouch could be thinking along those lines,” he said slowly. “Very possible . . . there have been some funny rumors flying around lately — helped along by Rita Skeeter, of course. It’s making a lot of people nervous, I reckon.” A grim smile twisted his lopsided mouth. “Oh if there’s one thing I hate,” he muttered, more to himself than to Harry, and his magical eye was fixed on the left-hand corner of the map, “it’s a Death Eater who walked free. . . .”

Harry stared at him. Could Moody possibly mean what Harry thought he meant?

“And now I want to ask *you* a question, Potter,” said Moody in a more businesslike tone.

Harry’s heart sank; he had thought this was coming. Moody was going to ask where he had got this map, which was a very dubious magical object — and the story of how it had fallen into his hands incriminated not only him, but his own father, Fred and George Weasley, and Professor Lupin, their last Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Moody waved the map in front of Harry, who braced himself —

“Can I borrow this?”

“Oh!” said Harry.

He was very fond of his map, but on the other hand, he was extremely relieved that Moody wasn’t asking where he’d got it, and there was no doubt that he owed Moody a favor.

“Yeah, okay.”

“Good boy,” growled Moody. “I can make good use of this . . . this might be *exactly* what I’ve been looking for. . . . Right, bed, Potter, come on, now. . . .”

They climbed to the top of the stairs together, Moody still examining the map as though it was a treasure the like of which he had never seen before. They walked in silence to the door of Moody’s office, where he stopped and looked up at Harry.

“You ever thought of a career as an Auror, Potter?”

“No,” said Harry, taken aback.

“You want to consider it,” said Moody, nodding and looking at Harry thoughtfully. “Yes, indeed . . . and incidentally . . . I’m guessing you weren’t just taking that egg for a walk tonight?”

“Er — no,” said Harry, grinning. “I’ve been working out the clue.”

Moody winked at him, his magical eye going haywire again.

“Nothing like a nighttime stroll to give you ideas, Potter. . . . See you in the morning. . . .”

He went back into his office, staring down at the Marauder’s Map again, and closed the door behind him.

Harry walked slowly back to Gryffindor Tower, lost in thought about Snape, and Crouch, and what it all meant. . . . Why was Crouch pretending to be ill, if he could manage to get to Hogwarts when he wanted to? What did he think Snape was concealing in his office?

And Moody thought he, Harry, ought to be an Auror! Interesting idea . . . but somehow, Harry thought, as he got quietly into his four-poster ten minutes later, the egg and the Cloak now safely back in his trunk, he thought he’d like to check how scarred the rest of them were before he chose it as a career.

Die Eier en die Oog

Harry het nie 'n idee hoe lank hy sal moet bad voor hy die geheim van die goue eier opgelos het nie, dus besluit hy om dit in die nag te doen wanneer hy so lank as wat nodig is, kan neem. Hoewel hy nie verdere gunste en gawes van Cedric wil aanvaar nie, besluit hy tog om die prefekte se badkamer te gebruik; baie minder mense word daar toegelaat, dus is dit baie minder waarskynlik dat hy gehinder sal word.

Hy beplan hierdie uitstappie sorgvuldig aangesien hy reeds tevore in die middel van die nag op verbode terrein deur Fillis, die opsigter, betrap is en dié ervaring nie graag wil herhaal nie. Die onsigbaarheidsmantel is natuurlik noodsaaklik en as nog 'n voorsorgmaatreël besluit Harry om die Plunderaar se Kaart ook saam te neem. Dit is naas die kleed die nuttigste hulpmiddel vir die oortreding van reëls wat Harry besit. Die kaart wys die hele Hogwarts, insluitend die vele kortpaaie en geheime tunnels, en bowenal wys dit die mense in die kasteel se gange as piepklein gemerkte kolletjies sodat Harry vooraf gewaarsku sal wees as iemand dalk na die badkamer sou kom.

Daardie Donderdagnag glip Harry uit die bed, trek die mantel aan, kruip met die trappe af en wag dat die portretopening moet oopgaan, net soos die nag toe Hagrid die drake vir hom gewys het. Hierdie keer is dit Ron wat buite staan en die wagwoord ("Piesangpoffertjies") vir die Vet Vrou gee. "Sterkte," mompel Ron toe hy by die geselskamer inklim en Harry verby hom sluip.

Vannag is dit moeilik om onder die mantel te beweeg, want Harry moet die swaar eier onder een arm vasknyp terwyl hy die kaart met die ander hand voor sy neus hou. Die maanverligte gange is egter verlate en stil en deur gereeld na die kaart te kyk, kan Harry seker maak dat hy nie in iemand vasloop wat hy eerder wil vermy nie. Toe hy by die standbeeld van Boris die Verskrikte kom, 'n towenaar wat verlore lyk en sy handskoene aan die verkeerde hande dra, kry hy die regte deur, leun nader en mompel die wagwoord, "*Dennevars*", net soos Cedric vir hom gesê het.

Die deur gaan krakend oop. Harry glip in, maak die grendel agter hom toe en gooi die onsigbaarheidsmantel af terwyl hy rondkyk.

Sy eerste gedagte is dat dit die moeite werd sou wees om 'n prefek te word net om hierdie badkamer te mag gebruik. Dit word sag verlig deur 'n manjifieke kandelaar met kerse, en alles is van wit marmer insluitend 'n leë, langwerpige, versonke soort swembad in die middel van die vloer. Omtrent 'n honderd goue krane staan om die kant van die swembad, elk een met 'n anderskleurige juweel wat op die knop ingelê is. Daar is selfs 'n duikplank. Lang wit linnegordyne hang voor die vensters, 'n groot stapel donsige wit handdoeke staan in die hoek en teen die muur hang 'n enkele portret in 'n goue raam van 'n blonde meermin wat vas aan die slaap op 'n rots sit. Haar lang hare wapper oor haar gesig elke keer dat sy 'nork.

Harry sit sy mantel, die eier en die kaart neer en stap vorentoe terwyl hy rondkyk sodat sy voetstappe teen die mure weergalm. Die badkamer is werklik manjifiek en hy kan nie wag om 'n paar krane oop te draai nie, maar tog, noudat hy hier is, kan hy die gedagte dat Cedric besig is om hom 'n streep te trek nie uit sy kop kry nie. Hoe op aarde gaan dit hom miskien help om die eier se geheim op te los? Hy sit een van die donsige handdoeke, die mantel, die kaart en die eier nietemin op die kant van die swembadgrootte bad neer, kniel langsaan en draai 'n paar krane oop.

Hy sien dadelik dat verskillende soorte borrelbadmiddels gemeng met water uit elke kraan kom. Dit is egter nie borrelbadmiddels soos Harry dit ken nie. Uit die een kraan kom pienk en blou borrels so groot soos voetballe, uit 'n ander stroom yswit skuim wat so dik is dat Harry seker is dat hy daarop sal kan staan as hy probeer; 'n derde stuur swaar geparfumeerde pers wolke die lug in wat bo die oppervlak van die water hang. Harry vermaak homself 'n ruk deur krane oop en toe te draai en hy verlustig hom veral in die een wat 'n straal water uitstuur wat hoë boë oor die water se oppervlak maak. Toe die diep poel vol warm water, skuim en borrels is (wat verbasend gou gebeur as 'n mens die grootte in ag neem), draai Harry al die krane toe, trek sy kamerjas, pajamas en pantoffels uit en glip in.

Dit is so diep dat sy voete skaars aan die bodem raak en hy swem eers 'n paar lengtes voor hy terug kant toe gaan waar hy water trap en na die eier staan. Dit is weliswaar baie lekker om in warm skuimende water te kan swem met gekleurde wolke stoom wat om hom warrel, maar hy het nog geen briljante ingewing gekry nie, nog geen skielike opwelling van begrip nie.

Harry steek sy arms uit, tel die eier met sy nat hande op en maak dit oop. Die kermende kreet vul die badkamer, weerklink galmend teen die marmermure, maar dit is nog net so onverstaanbaar soos tevore; die eggo's maak dit selfs erger. Hy klap dit vinnig toe, bang dat dit vir Fillis sal lok en wonder of dit nie dalk Cedric se plan was nie – en toe, en hy skrik so groot dat hy die eier laat val sodat dit kletterend oor die vloer wegrol, hoor hy iemand praat.

“Ek sal dit *in* die water sit as ek jy was.”

Harry skrik so erg dat hy ’n hele klomp borrels insluk. Hy kom hoersend orent en sien dan die spook van ’n baie nors meisie wat kruisbeen op een van die krane sit. Dit is Katryn Kermkous wat gewoonlik drie verdiepings ondertoe in een van die toilette se S-buigstuk sit.

“Katryn!” sê Harry verontwaardig. “Ek – ek het niks aan nie!”

Die skuim is so dik dat dit kwalik saak maak, maar hy het ’n nare gevoel dat Katryn al vandat hy hier aangekom het uit een van die krane op hom spioeneer.

“Ek het my oë toegemaak toe jy ingekom het,” sê sy terwyl sy knipogend deur haar dik brilglase na hom kyk. “Jy het *eeue* laas vir my kom kuier.”

“Ja . . . wel . . .” sê Harry en hy buig sy knieë so ietwat, net om heeltemal seker te maak dat Katryn niks behalwe sy kop kan sien nie, “maar ek mag eintlik nie na jou badkamer toe gaan nie, oukei. Dis die meisies s’n.”

“Dit het jou nie vantevore gepla nie,” sê Katryn mistroostig. “Jy was gedurig daar.”

Dit is waar, maar ook net omdat Katryn se badkamer ’n handige plek was waar Harry, Ron en Hermien Polisouspaljas in die geheim kon brou – ’n verbode towerdrankie wat Harry en Ron vir ’n uur lank in lewende replikas van Krabbe en Goliath verander het sodat hulle by die Slibberins se geselskamer kon inglip.

“Ek het raas gekry daaroor,” sê Harry. Dis gedeeltelik waar; Percy het hom eenkeer betrap toe hy by Katryn se badkamer uitgekom het. “Toe’t ek gedink ek moet liever nie weer soontoe gaan nie.”

“O . . . ek sien . . .” sê Katryn en sy krap op ’n stug manier aan ’n puisie op haar ken. “Wel . . . in elk geval . . . ek sou die eier in die water sit. Dis wat Cedric Diggory gedoen het.”

“Het jy hom ook afgeloer?” sê Harry verontwaardig. “Wat’s jou idee? Glip jy saans hierheen om te kyk hoe die prefekte bad?”

“Partykeer,” sê Katryn effens skelm, “maar ek het nog nooit tevore uitgekom om met iemand te praat nie.”

“Ek voel geëerd,” sê Harry somber. “Maak toe jou oë!”

Hy maak seker dat Katryn haar bril heeltemal toehou voor hy homself uit die bad hys, die handdoek sorgvuldig om hom draai en die eier gaan haal.

Toe hy terug in die water is, loer Katryn deur haar vingers en sê, “Toe, toe . . . maak dit onder die water oop!”

Harry hou die eier onder die skuim en maak dit oop . . . hierdie keer skree dit nie. ’n Gorrelende lied kom daaruit, maar dis onmoontlik om die woorde deur die water te kan hoor.

“Jy moet jou kop onder die water indruk,” sê Katryn wat lyk asof sy dit geniet om oor hom baas te speel. “Toe nou!”

Harry haal diep asem en glip onder die oppervlak in – en toe, daar waar hy in die skuim op die marmerbodem sit, hoor hy hoe ’n koor van vreemde stemme uit die oop eier in sy hande vir hom sing:

*“Kom soek ons waar ons stemme klink,
Want bo die grond kan ons nie sing,
Terwyl jy soek, moet jy ook dink,
Wat ons nou het wat jy wil vind,
’n Uur het jy om rond te kyk,
Om dit wat ons versteek te kry,
Meer as ’n uur, jou kans is klein –
Te laat, dis weg, vir ewig verdwyn.”*

Harry dryf stadig terug boontoe, breek deur die borrels op die oppervlak en skud die hare uit sy oë.

“Het jy dit gehoor?” vra Katryn.

“Ja . . . ‘Kom soek ons waar ons stemme klink . . .’ en as ek wil weet . . . Wag eers, ek moet nog ’n keer gaan luister . . .” Weer verdwyn hy onder die water.

Harry moet drie keer onder die water na die eier se lied luister voor hy dit uit sy kop kan opsê; toe trap hy ’n rukkie water terwyl hy kliphard dink en Katryn hom sit en dophou.

“Ek moet mense gaan soek wat nie hul stemme bo die grond kan gebruik nie . . .” sê hy stadig. “H’m . . . wie kan dit wees?”

“Jy’s ook maar toe, nè?”

Hy het Katryn Kermkous nog nooit so vrolik sien lyk nie, behalwe die dag toe Hermien ’n kat se harige gesig en stert van haar dosis Polisouspaljas gekry het.

Terwyl hy dink, kyk Harry in die badkamer rond . . . as ’n mens die stemme net onder die water kan hoor, dan maak dit sin dat dit onderwaterse wesens is. Hy noem dit aan Katryn wat skeef glimlag.

“Wel, dis wat Diggory ook gedink het,” sê sy. “Hy het vir ure daar met homself lê en praat. Ure en ure . . . die borrels was amper almal weg . . .”

“Onder die water . . .” sê Harry stadig. “Katryn . . . wat woon alles in die meer behalwe die reuse-inkvis?”

“O, allerhande goeters,” sê sy. “Ek gaan soms soontoe . . . as ek nie anders kan nie . . . as iemand my toilet spoel wanneer ek dit nie verwag nie . . .”

Harry probeer om nie te dink aan hoe Katryn Kermkous saam met die inhoud van haar toilet in die pyp af meer toe spoel nie. “Wel,” sê hy, “is daar iets in die meer wat menslike stemme het? Wag ’n bietjie –”

Harry se oog het op die prent van die slapende meermin teen die muur geval. “Katryn, daar is *meermense*, nie waar nie?”

“Ooo, baie goed,” sê sy en haar dik brilglase flits. “Diggory het baie langer as dit gevat! En sy was toe nog wakker ook,” – Katryn beduie met haar kop na die meermin en daar is ’n uitdrukking van die grootste minagting op haar gesig – “het gegiggel en gepronk en haar vinne gewapper . . .”

“Dis wat dit is!” sê Harry opgewonde. “Dan is die tweede taak om die meermense in die meer te gaan soek en . . . en . . .”

Hy besef skielik wat hy sê en voel hoe die opgewondenheid uit hom vloei asof iemand so pas ’n prop uit sy maag getrek het. Hy is glad nie ’n goeie swemmer nie; hy het nog nooit juis kans gehad om te oefen nie. Dudley het lesse gehad toe hy klein was, maar tant Petunia en oom Vernon het waarskynlik gehoop dat Harry eendag sal verdrink en het nie moeite gedoen om hom ook te laat leer nie. ’n Paar lengtes in hierdie bad is een ding, maar die meer is groot en baie diep . . . en die meermense woon seker heel onder op die bodem . . .

“Katryn,” sê Harry stadig, “hoe gaan ek asemhaal?”

Toe hy dit sê, skiet Katryn se oë meteens vol tranes.

“Taktloos!” mompel sy en vroetel in haar kleed op soek na ’n sakdoek.

“Wat is taktloos?” vra Harry verwilderd.

“Om van asemhaal voor my te praat!” sê sy skril en haar stem weer-galm deur die badkamer. “Wanneer ek nie . . . wanneer ek . . . jare gelede laas . . .” Sy bêre haar gesig in haar sakdoek en snuif hard.

Harry onthou hoe gevoelig Katryn nog altyd was omdat sy dood is, maar nie een van die ander spoke wat hy ken, maak so ’n bohaai daaroor nie. “Jammer,” sê hy ongeduldig, “ek het nie bedoel – ek het net vergeet . . .”

“O ja, dis baie maklik om te vergeet dat Katryn dood is,” sê Katryn snikkend terwyl sy deur dikgeswelde oë na hom staar. “Niemand mis my ooit nie, nie eens toe ek nog gelewe het nie. Het hulle ure en ure gevat om my liggaam te kry – ek weet, ek het daar vir hulle gesit en wag. Toe’t Olive Hornby by die badkamer ingekom – ‘Is jy al weer hier binne besig om nukkerig te wees, Katryn?’ het sy gesê. ‘Want professor Dippet het gesê dat ek jou moet kom soek –’ En toe sien sy my liggaam . . . ooe, sy sal dit tot haar dood toe nie vergeet nie, daarvan het ek seker gemaak . . . het haar oral gevolg en haar herinner, ek het, ek onthou by haar broer se troue –”

Harry luister egter nie meer nie; hy dink weer aan die meermense se lied. “Wat ons nou het wat jy wil vind.” Dit klink so half asof hulle iets van hom gaan steel, iets wat hy sal moet terugkry. Wat kan dit wees wat hulle gaan vat?

“– en toe gaan sy na die Ministerie vir Towerkuns sodat hulle my moet keer om haar te volg en toe kom ek terug hierheen en kom woon in my toilet.”

"Dis goed," sê Harry ingedagte. "Wel, ek is 'n hele ent verder as wat ek was . . . maak gou weer jou oë toe, ek wil uitklim."

Hy gaan haal die eier op die bodem van die bad, klim uit, droog homself af en trek sy pajamas en kamerjas weer aan.

"Sal jy weer 'n slag vir my in my badkamer kom kuier?" vra Katryn Kermkous mistroostig toe Harry die onsigbaarheidsmantel optel.

"H'm . . . ek sal probeer," sê Harry hoewel hy in die stilligheid dink dat hy net weer na Katryn se badkamer sal gaan as al die ander toilette in die kasteel verstop is. "Sien jou, Katryn . . . dankie vir jou hulp."

"Tata," sê sy somber en toe Harry sy onsigbaarheidsmantel omhang, sien hy hoe sy in die kraan terugglip.

Buite in die donker gang bestudeer Harry die Plunderaar se Kaart om seker te maak dat alles nog veilig is. Ja, die kolletjies wat Fillis en mev. Norris voorstel, is nog veilig in hul kantoor . . . dit lyk asof niemand anders rondbeweeg nie, behalwe Nurks wat in die trofeekamer op die boonste verdieping rondbons . . . Harry het egter skaars sy eerste tree terug Griffindortoring toe gegee, of iets anders op die kaart vang sy oog . . . iets wat werklik eienaardig is.

Dit is *nie* net Nurks wat beweeg nie. 'n Enkele kolletjie beweeg in 'n kamer in die onderste linkerhandse hoek rond – Snerp se kantoor. Die kolletjie is egter nie "Severus Snerp" gemerk nie . . . dit is Bartemius Crouch.

Harry staar na die kolletjie. Mnr. Crouch is veronderstel om te siek te wees om by die werk óf by die Kersbal te kan wees – wat maak hy dan eenuur in die oggend in Hogwarts? Harry kyk hoe die kolletjie in die vertrek rondbeweeg en hier en daar huiwer . . .

Harry aarsel en dink . . . toe kry sy nuuskierigheid die oorhand. Hy draai om en stap in die teenoorgestelde rigting na die naaste stel trappe. Hy gaan uitvind wat Crouch in die mou voer.

Harry loop so sag moontlik met die trappe af hoewel die gesigte in sommige van die portrette tog nuuskierig draai as 'n vloerplank kraak of sy pajamas effens ritsel. Hy sluip in die gang aan die onderkant af, stoot 'n tapisserie wat 'n ent verder hang uit die pad en glip langs 'n smal stel trappe af, 'n kortpad wat hom twee verdiepings ondertoe sal neem. Hy loer gedurig na die kaart terwyl hy daaroor wonder . . . dit is net nie in korrekte, wetsgehoorsame mnr. Crouch se aard om so laat in die nag in iemand anders se kantoor rond te sluip nie . . .

Halfpad met die trappe af, toe hy nie mooi dink wat hy doen nie en op niks behalwe mnr. Crouch se vreemde gedrag konsentreer nie, sink Harry se been skielik deur die foptreetjie waaroor Neville altyd vergeet om te spring. Hy verloor sy balans en die goue eier wat nog klam is na die bad, glip onder sy arm uit – hy gryp daarna, maar dis te laat; die eier val klaterend met die trappe af sodat dit elke treetjie met 'n geluid soos 'n

bastrom tref – die onsigbaarheidsmantel gly – Harry gryp daarna en die Plunderaar se Kaart fladder uit sy hande en vat ses trappies verder grond waar Harry, wat tot bo sy knie in die treetjie vassit, dit nie kan bykom nie.

Die goue eier rol deur die tapisserie aan die onderkant van die trappe, vlieg oop en begin hard en kermend in die gang skree. Harry haal sy towerstaf uit en sukkel om die Plunderaar se Kaart daarmee skoon te vee, maar dit is buite bereik –

Hy trek die onsigbaarheidsmantel weer oor hom en kom orent terwyl hy fyn luister, sy oë op skrefies van angs . . . en kort daarna –
“NURKS!”

Dit is onmiskenbaar Fillis, die opsigter, se woedende kreet. Harry hoor hoe sy haastige skuifelstappie nader en nader kom, sy aamborstige stem skril van woede.

“Watse kabaal is dit? Wil jy die hele kasteel wakker raas? Ek sal jou kry, Nurks, ek sal jou kry, jou . . . en wat is dit?”

Fillis se voetstappe kom tot stilstand; daar is ’n geklik van metaal op metaal en die gekerm hou op – Fillis het die eier opgetel en toegemaak. Harry staan doodstil en luister. Een been is nog steeds styf in die tower-treetjie vasgevang. Enige oomblik gaan Fillis die tapisserie wegstoot in die verwagting om Nurks te sien . . . daar gaan egter geen Nurks wees nie . . . as hy dan met die trappe opstap, sal hy die Plunderaar se Kaart kry . . . en onsigbaarheidsmantel oftenot, die kaart gaan wys presies waar “Harry Potter” nou is.

“Eier?” sê Fillis gedemp aan die onderpunt van die trappe. “My skat!” – dis duidelik dat mev. Norris opgedaag het – “dit is mos ’n Drietowe-naarsleidraad! Dit behoort aan ’n skoolkampioen!”

Harry voel naar; sy hart klop nou baie vinnig –

“NURKS!” brul Fillis wat nou hoog in sy noppies is. “Jy het gesteel!” Hy pluk die tapisserie weg en Harry sien sy aaklige, sakkerige gesig en sy bleek uitpeuloë toe hy by die donker, verlate stel trappe opkyk.

“Kruip weg, hê?” sê hy sag. “Ek sal jou kry, Nurks . . . jy’t ’n Drie-towe-naarsleidraad gesteel, Nurks . . . hiervoor sal Dompeldorius jou uitgooi, jou vieslike dief van ’n poltergeist . . .”

Fillis begin om die trappe uit te klim met sy maer, stofkleurige kat op sy hakke. Mev. Norris se lampagtige oë, wat so baie soos haar baas s’n lyk, is vol op Harry gerig. Hy het al voorheen gewonder of die onsigbaarheidsmantel op katte werk . . . Bewend van spanning kyk hy hoe Fillis in sy ou flenniekamerjas al nader en nader kom – hy probeer wanhopig om sy been los te kry, maar dit sink net verder weg – enige oomblik gaan Fillis die kaart sien of in hom vasloop –

“Fillis? Wat gaan hier aan?”

Fillis steek ’n paar tree van Harry af vas en draai om. Aan die onderpunt van die trappe staan die enigste persoon wat Harry dieper in die

puikel kan dompel – Snerp. Hy dra 'n lang grys naghemp en hy lyk woe-
dend.

“Dis Nurks, professor,” fluister Fillis kwaadwillig. “Hy het hierdie eier
by die trappe afgegooi.”

Snerp klim die trappe vinnig uit en gaan langs Fillis staan. Harry kners
op sy tande, hy is seker dat sy hart so hard klop dat dit hom enige oom-
blik gaan weggee . . .

“Nurks?” sê Snerp sag terwyl hy na die eier in Fillis se hand staar.
“Maar Nurks kon nie in my kantoor . . .”

“Was die eier dan in u kantoor, professor?”

“Natuurlik nie,” snou Snerp, “ek het 'n gehamer en 'n gekerm ge-
hoor –”

“Ja, professor, dit was die eier –”

– toe het ek kom kyk wat aangaan –”

– Nurks het dit gegooi, professor –”

– en toe ek verby my kantoor stap, sien ek dat die fakkels brand en
dat 'n kasdeur oopstaan! Iemand het dit deursoek!”

“Maar Nurks kon tog nie –”

“Ek weet hy kon nie, Fillis!” snou Snerp. “Ek verseël my kantoor met
'n towerspreuk wat geen towenaar kan breek nie!” Snerp kyk met die
trappe op, regdeur Harry en dan weer af in die gang aan die onderkant.
“Ek wil hê jy moet my kom help om die oortreder te soek, Fillis.”

“Ek – ja, professor – maar –”

Fillis staar verlangend met die trappe op, dwarsdeur Harry wat kan
sien dat hy nie lus is om die kans om Nurks op heterdaad te betrap deur
sy vingers te laat glip nie. *Loop*, pleit Harry stilswyend, *gaan saam met*
Snerp . . . loop . . . Mev. Norris loer om Fillis se bene . . . Harry het 'n nare
spesmaas dat sy hom kan ruik . . . hoekom het hy tog so baie van daar-
die gekeurde skuim in die bad laat loop?

“Die ding is, professor,” sê Fillis pleitend, “die skoolhoof sal my hier-
die keer moet glo. Nurks het van 'n student gesteel, dis my kans om hom
eens en vir altyd uit die kasteel te laat smyt –”

“Fillis, ek gee nie 'n duiwel om vir daardie poltergeist nie, dis my kan-
toor wat –”

Klonk. Klonk. Klonk.

Snerp word dadelik stil. Sowel hy as Fillis staar na die onderpunt van
die trappe. Harry kan tussen hul koppe deur sien hoe Maloog Moodie al
nader hink. Moodie dra sy ou reismantel oor sy naghemp en leun soos
altyd op sy staf.

“Pajamapartytjie, of wat?” grom hy boontoe.

“Professor Snerp en ek het geluide gehoor, professor,” sê Fillis dade-
lik. “Nurks die poltergeist het soos gewoonlik goeters rondgegooi – en
toe't professor Snerp gesien dat iemand by sy kantoor ingebreek –”

“Hou jou snater!” sis Snerp vir Fillis.

Moodie gee ’n tree nader aan die voet van die trappe. Harry sien hoe sy magiese oog oor Snerp speel en toe, onmiskenbaar, op hom tot rus kom.

Harry se hart gee ’n wilde skop. Moodie kan deur die onsigbaarheidsmantel sien . . . net hy kan sien presies hoe snaaks die hele toneel is . . . Snerp in sy naghemp, Fillis wat die eier vashou en hy, Harry, met sy been vasgevang in die trap reg agter hulle. Moodie se skeefgetrekte mond gaan oop van verbasing. Vir ’n paar oomblikke kyk hy en Harry mekaar vol in die oë. Dan maak Moodie sy mond toe en draai sy blou oog na Snerp.

“Het ek reg gehoor, Snerp?” sê hy stadig. “Iemand het by jou kantoor ingebreek?”

“Dis nie belangrik nie,” sê Snerp kil.

“Inteendeel,” grom Moodie, “dit is uiters belangrik. Wie sal by jou kantoor wil inbreek?”

“’n Student, sou ek sê,” sê Snerp. Harry sien hoe ’n aartjie aaklig gril-lerig teen Snerp se slaap pols. “Dit het al tevore gebeur. Bestanddele vir towerdrankies het uit my privaat voorraadkas verdwyn . . . waarskynlik studente wat allerhande onwettige mengsels maak . . .”

“So jy dink hulle is agter bestanddele vir towerdrankies aan, hè?” sê Moodie. “Jy steek nie dalk iets anders in jou kantoor weg nie, h’m?”

Harry sien hoe die kant van Snerp se sieklike blas gesig ’n nare baksteenrooi kleur word en dat die aartjie teen sy slaap nog vinniger klop.

“Jy weet ek steek niks weg nie, Moodie,” sê hy in ’n sagte en gevaarlike stem, “jy het my kantoor mos self van hoek tot kant deursoek.”

Moodie se gesig vertrek in ’n glimlag. “Auror se voorreg, Snerp. Dompeldorius het gesê ek moet ’n ogie hou –”

“Dompeldorius vertrou my toevallig,” sê Snerp deur geklemde kake. “Ek weier om te glo dat hy opdrag gegee het dat my kantoor deursoek moet word!”

“Natuurlik vertrou Dompeldorius jou,” grom Moodie. “Hy vertrou almal, nie waar nie? Glo mos in tweede kanse. Maar ek – ek sê daar is kolle wat nie uitwas nie, Snerp. Kolle wat nooit uitkom nie, jy weet wat ek bedoel?”

Toe doen Snerp skielik iets wat baie vreemd is. Hy gryp sy linkerarm krampagtig met sy regterhand vas, nes of hy sy arm skielik seergemaak het.

Moodie lag. “Gaan terug bed toe, Snerp.”

“Jy het nie die gesag om my rond te stuur nie!” sis Snerp terwyl hy sy arm laat los asof hy vir homself kwaad is. “Ek het net soveel reg as jy om na donker in hierdie skool rond te sluip!”

“Sluip voort,” sê Moodie, maar sy stem is dreigend. “Ek sien uit daarna om jou die een of ander tyd in ’n donker hoekie raak te loop . . . Terloops, jy’t iets laat val . . .”

Dis met 'n benoude beklemming dat Harry sien dat Moodie na die Plunderaar se Kaart wys wat nog steeds ses trappe onder hom lê. Toe sowel Snerp as Fillis omdraai om daarna te kyk, lig Harry sy arms wanhopig onder die mantel op en maak woeste gebare om Moodie se aandag te trek terwyl hy die woorde "Dis myne, dis *myne!*" met sy mond maak.

Snerp het sy hand uitgesteek. Daar is 'n aaklige uitdrukking op sy gesig wat daarop dui dat hy besig is om te besef wat aan die gang is –

"*Accio perkament!*"

Die kaart vlieg die lug in, glip deur Snerp se uitgestrekte vingers en seil met die trappe af tot in Moodie se hand.

"My fout," sê Moodie bedaard. "Dis myne – moet dit vroeër laat val het –"

Snerp se swart oë dartel egter van die eier in Fillis se arms na die kaart in Moodie se hand en Harry kan sien dat hy twee en twee bymekaarsit soos net Snerp dit kan doen . . .

"Potter," sê hy sag.

"Wat sê jy daar?" vra Moodie bedaard terwyl hy die kaart opvou en in sy sak steek.

"Potter!" snou Snerp en hy draai sy kop en staar na die plek waar Harry staan asof hy hom skielik kan sien. "Daardie eier is Potter s'n. Daardie stuk perkament behoort aan Potter. Ek het dit al tevore gesien, ek herken dit! Potter is hier! Potter in sy onsigbaarheidsmantel!"

Snerp steek sy hande soos 'n blinde man uit en begin met die trappe uitklim; Harry kan sweer dat sy oorgroot neusgate wyd oopgesper is om hom uit te snuffel – vasgevang leun Harry agteroor in 'n poging om Snerp se vingerpunte te vermy, maar enige oomblik –

"Daar's niks nie, Snerp!" blaf Moodie. "Maar ek sal met graagte vir die skoolhoof gaan sê hoe gereed jy is om vir Harry Potter te blameer!"

"Wat bedoel jy daarmee?" snou Snerp wat omswaai om na Moodie te kyk, hoewel sy uitgestrekte hande nog steeds net enkele sentimeters van Harry se bors af is.

"Ek bedoel dat Dompeldorius baie geïnteresseerd is in wie almal hul mes vir daardie seun in het!" sê Moodie terwyl hy nader na die onderkant van die trappe hink. "En ek ook, Snerp . . . baie geïnteresseerd . . ." Die lig van die fakkel flikker oor sy geskende gesig sodat die littekens en die gat in sy neus donkerder en dieper as ooit lyk.

Snerp staar af na Moodie sodat Harry die uitdrukking op sy gesig nie kan sien nie. Vir 'n paar oomblikke roer of praat niemand nie. Dan laat Snerp sy hande stadig sak.

"Ek het bloot gedink," sê Snerp in 'n stem wat gedwonge kalm klink, "dat as Potter weer na ure ronddwaal . . . dit is 'n ongelukkige gewoonte wat hy het . . . dan moet hy gekeer word. Vir – vir sy eie veiligheid."

“A, ek sien,” sê Moodie sag. “So jy dra Potter se belange op die hart, hè?”

Daar is ’n stilte. Snerp en Moodie staar nog steeds na mekaar. Mev. Norris gee ’n harde miaau. Sy loer nog steeds om Fillis se bene asof sy die oorsprong van die borrelbadgeur soek.

“Ek gaan terug bed toe,” sê Snerp kortaf.

“Die beste idee wat jy nog die hele nag gehad het,” sê Moodie. “Goed, Fillis, gee nou maar daardie eier vir my –”

“Nee!” sê Fillis wat die eier vasklou asof dit sy eersgebore seun is.

“Professor Moodie, dit is die bewysstuk van Nurks se verraad!”

“Dis die eiendom van die kampioen van wie hy dit gesteel het,” sê Moodie. “Gee dit hier, dadelik.”

Snerp swaai met die trappe af ondertoe en stap sonder ’n verdere woord verby Moodie. Fillis maak ’n koergeluidjie vir mev. Norris wat vir nog ’n paar sekondes stil na Harry staar voor sy omdraai en agter haar baas aanloop. Harry hoor hoe Snerp in die gang af stap; Fillis gee die eier vir Moodie en verdwyn ook uit sig terwyl hy “Toemaar, my skat . . . ons sal vir Dompeldorius môreoggend gaan sien . . . vir hom sê wat Nurks gedoen het . . .” teenoor mev. Norris brom.

’n Deur klap toe. Harry kyk nog steeds na Moodie wat sy staf teen die onderste trappie neersit en moeisaam en met ’n dowwe *klonk* op elke tweede treetjie met die trappe na hom toe opklim.

“So hittete, Potter,” mompel hy.

“Ja . . . ek – h’m . . . dankie,” sê Harry floutjies.

“Wat is dit dié?” sê Moodie toe hy die Plunderaar se Kaart uit sy sak haal en dit oopvou.

“Kaart van Hogwarts,” sê Harry wat wens dat Moodie hom wil uittrek uit die trap; sy been is besig om regtig seer te word.

“Merlin se baard,” fluister Moodie en toe hy die kaart bekyk, is dit of sy betowerde oog die kluts skoon kwytraak. “Dit . . . dit is vir jou ’n kaart, Potter!”

“Ja, dis . . . dis nogal nuttig,” sê Harry. Sy oë traan van die pyn. “H’m – professor Moodie, dink u dat u my dalk hier kan uitkry –?”

“Wat? O! Ja . . . ja, natuurlik . . .”

Moodie vat Harry se arms vas en trek; Harry se been kom uit die fop-treetjie en hy gaan staan op die een net bo dit.

Moodie staar nog steeds na die kaart. “Potter . . .” sê hy stadig, “jy het nie dalk gesien wie by Snerp se kantoor ingebreek het nie, of het jy? Ek bedoel, hier op die kaart?”

“H’m . . . ja, ek het . . .” erken Harry. “Dit was mnr. Crouch.”

Moodie se magiese oog speel oor die hele kaart. Hy lyk skielik uiters bekommerd.

“Crouch?” sê hy. “Is jy – is jy seker, Potter?”

“Doodseker,” sê Harry.

“Wel, hy’s nie meer hier nie,” sê Moodie en sy oog speel nog steeds oor die kaart. “Crouch . . . dis baie – baie interessant . . .”

Vir amper ’n minuut sê hy niks, staar bloot na die kaart. Harry kan sien dat hierdie nuus iets vir Moodie beteken en hy wil baie graag weet wat dit is. Hy wonder of hy dit kan waag om te vra. Hy’s ’n bietjie skrikkerig vir Moodie . . . tog het Moodie nou net gesorg dat hy nie in groot moeilikheid kom nie . . .

“H’m . . . professor Moodie . . . wat dink u het mnr. Crouch in Snerp se kantoor gesoek?”

Moodie lig sy magiese oog van die kaart af en laat dit bewend op Harry rus. Dit is ’n priemende blik en dit voel vir Harry asof Moodie hom opsom, asof hy wonder of hy hom moet vertel, wat hy alles kan sê.

“Kom ons stel dit so, Potter,” brom Moodie uiteindelik, “hulle sê ou Maloog is behep met Donker towenaars . . . maar Maloog is niks – niks – teen Barty Crouch nie.”

Hy staar nog steeds na die kaart. Harry brand om meer te weet.

“Professor Moodie?” sê hy weer. “Dink u . . . het dit enigiets te doen met . . . dalk dink mnr. Crouch dat hier iets aangaan . . .”

“Soos wat?” vra Moodie skerp.

Harry wonder wat hy alles durf sê. Hy wil nie hê Moodie moet vermoed dat hy ’n bron van inligting buite Hogwarts het nie; dit kan tot moeilike vrae oor Sirius lei.

“Ek weet nie,” mompel Harry, “maar die laaste tyd het daar snaakse goed gebeur, nie waar nie? Dit was in die *Daaglikse Profeet* . . . die Donker Merk by die Wêreldbeker en die Doodseters en alles . . .”

Albei Moodie se onpaar oë gaan wyd oop.

“Jy’s slim, Potter,” sê hy. Sy magiese oog draai terug na die Plunderaar se Kaart. “Crouch dink dalk in hierdie rigting,” sê hy stadig. “Dis baie moontlik . . . snaakse gerugte het die laaste tyd die ronde gedoen – aangehelp deur Rika Skinner, natuurlik. Dit maak baie mense senuagtig, sou ek dink.” ’n Grimmige glimlaggie vertrek sy skewe mond. “O, as daar een ding is wat ek haat,” mompel hy meer teenoor homself as teenoor Harry en sy magiese oog is vasgenaël op die onderste linkerhandse hoek van die kaart, “dan is dit ’n Doodseter wat losgekom het . . .”

Harry staar na hom. Bedoel Moodie wat Harry dink hy bedoel?

“Nou moet ek vir jou ’n vraag vra, Potter,” sê Moodie in ’n saaklike stemtoon.

Harry se hart sink; hy het dit verwag. Moodie gaan vra waar hy aan die kaart kom. Dit is inderdaad ’n baie twyfelagtige magiese voorwerp – en die verhaal van hoe dit in sy hande beland het, betrek nie net vir hom nie, maar ook sy eie pa, Fred en George Weasley en professor Lupin, hul vorige onderwyser vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste. Moodie waai die kaart voor Harry, wat homself staal –

“Kan ek dit leen?”

“O!” sê Harry. Hy is baie erg oor die kaart, maar aan die ander kant is hy bitter verlig dat Moodie nie wil weet hoe hy daaraan gekom het nie, en dit is sonder twyfel so dat hy vir Moodie 'n guns skuld. “Ja, oukei.”

“Mooi so,” grom Moodie. “Ek kan dit goed gebruik . . . dis dalk *net* wat ek nodig het . . . Reg, bedtyd, Potter, komaan . . .”

Hulle stap saam met die trappe op boontoe terwyl Moodie nog steeds na die kaart staar asof dit 'n soort skat is waarvan hy die gelyke nog nooit tevore gesien het nie. Hulle loop in stilte tot by Moodie se kantoor waar hy gaan staan, na Harry kyk en sê, “Al ooit daaraan gedink om 'n Auror te word, Harry?”

“Nee,” sê Harry uit die veld geslaan.

“Dink daaroor,” sê Moodie kopknikkend terwyl hy peinsend na Harry kyk. “Ja, inderdaad . . . en terloops . . . jy't daardie eier darem seker nie net vir 'n uitstappie gevat nie, of hoe?”

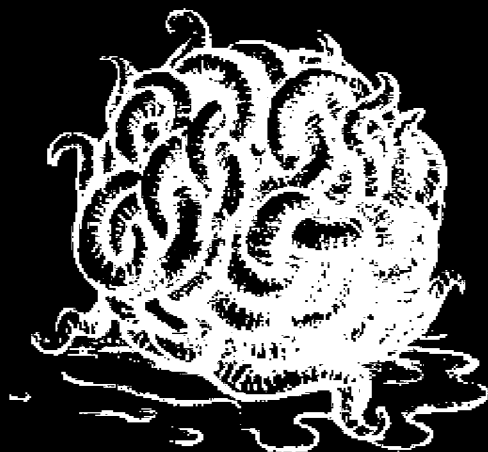
“H'm – nee,” sê Harry met 'n grinnik. “Ek het aan die leidraad gewerk.”

Moodie knipoog vir hom en sy magiese oog gaan weer eens soos 'n mal ding te kere. “Niks soos 'n nagtelike wandeling om 'n mens se brein aan die werk te sit nie, Potter . . . sien jou môre . . .” Hy gaan by sy kantoordeur in, staar weer eens na die Plunderaar se Kaart en maak die deur dan agter hom toe.

Harry stap stadig terug na die Griffindortoring. Hy is in gedagtes versonke oor Snerp en Crouch en wat dit alles kan beteken . . . Hoekom maak Crouch asof hy siek is wanneer hy heeltemal daartoe in staat is om na Hogwarts te kom? Wat vermoed hy dat Snerp in sy kantoor wegsteek?

En dan dink Moodie dat hy wat Harry is 'n Auror moet word! 'n Interessante gedagte . . . Maar toe Harry tien minute later, nadat hy die eier en die kleed veilig in sy trommel gebêre het, stilletjies in sy hemelbed glip, dink hy dat hy eers sal wil weet hoeveel littekens die res van hulle het voor hy dit as 'n loopbaan kies.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



THE SECOND TASK

You said you'd already worked out that egg clue!" said Hermione indignantly.

"Keep your voice down!" said Harry crossly. "I just need to — sort of fine-tune it, all right?"

He, Ron, and Hermione were sitting at the very back of the Charms class with a table to themselves. They were supposed to be practicing the opposite of the Summoning Charm today — the Banishing Charm. Owing to the potential for nasty accidents when objects kept flying across the room, Professor Flitwick had given each student a stack of cushions on which to practice, the theory being that these wouldn't hurt anyone if they went off target. It was a good theory, but it wasn't working very well. Neville's aim was so

poor that he kept accidentally sending much heavier things flying across the room — Professor Flitwick, for instance.

“Just forget the egg for a minute, all right?” Harry hissed as Professor Flitwick went whizzing resignedly past them, landing on top of a large cabinet. “I’m trying to tell you about Snape and Moody. . . .”

This class was an ideal cover for a private conversation, as everyone was having far too much fun to pay them any attention. Harry had been recounting his adventures of the previous night in whispered installments for the last half hour.

“Snape said Moody’s searched his office as well?” Ron whispered, his eyes alight with interest as he banished a cushion with a sweep of his wand (it soared into the air and knocked Parvati’s hat off). “What . . . d’you reckon Moody’s here to keep an eye on Snape as well as Karkaroff?”

“Well, I dunno if that’s what Dumbledore asked him to do, but he’s definitely doing it,” said Harry, waving his wand without paying much attention, so that his cushion did an odd sort of belly flop off the desk. “Moody said Dumbledore only lets Snape stay here because he’s giving him a second chance or something. . . .”

“What?” said Ron, his eyes widening, his next cushion spinning high into the air, ricocheting off the chandelier, and dropping heavily onto Flitwick’s desk. “Harry . . . maybe Moody thinks *Snape* put your name in the Goblet of Fire!”

“Oh Ron,” said Hermione, shaking her head skeptically, “we thought Snape was trying to kill Harry before, and it turned out he was saving Harry’s life, remember?”

She Banished a cushion and it flew across the room and landed in the box they were all supposed to be aiming at. Harry looked at Hermione, thinking . . . it was true that Snape had saved his life once, but the odd thing was, Snape definitely loathed him, just as he'd loathed Harry's father when they had been at school together. Snape loved taking points from Harry, and had certainly never missed an opportunity to give him punishments, or even to suggest that he should be suspended from the school.

"I don't care what Moody says," Hermione went on. "Dumbledore's not stupid. He was right to trust Hagrid and Professor Lupin, even though loads of people wouldn't have given them jobs, so why shouldn't he be right about Snape, even if Snape is a bit —"

"— evil," said Ron promptly. "Come on, Hermione, why are all these Dark wizard catchers searching his office, then?"

"Why has Mr. Crouch been pretending to be ill?" said Hermione, ignoring Ron. "It's a bit funny, isn't it, that he can't manage to come to the Yule Ball, but he can get up here in the middle of the night when he wants to?"

"You just don't like Crouch because of that elf, Winky," said Ron, sending a cushion soaring into the window.

"*You* just want to think Snape's up to something," said Hermione, sending her cushion zooming neatly into the box.

"I just want to know what Snape did with his first chance, if he's on his second one," said Harry grimly, and his cushion, to his very great surprise, flew straight across the room and landed neatly on top of Hermione's.

Obedient to Sirius's wish of hearing about anything odd at Hogwarts, Harry sent him a letter by brown owl that night, explaining all about Mr. Crouch breaking into Snape's office, and Moody and Snape's conversation. Then Harry turned his attention in earnest to the most urgent problem facing him: how to survive underwater for an hour on the twenty-fourth of February.

Ron quite liked the idea of using the Summoning Charm again — Harry had explained about Aqua-Lungs, and Ron couldn't see why Harry shouldn't Summon one from the nearest Muggle town. Hermione squashed this plan by pointing out that, in the unlikely event that Harry managed to learn how to operate an Aqua-Lung within the set limit of an hour, he was sure to be disqualified for breaking the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy — it was too much to hope that no Muggles would spot an Aqua-Lung zooming across the countryside to Hogwarts.

"Of course, the ideal solution would be for you to Transfigure yourself into a submarine or something," Hermione said. "If only we'd done human Transfiguration already! But I don't think we start that until sixth year, and it can go badly wrong if you don't know what you're doing. . . ."

"Yeah, I don't fancy walking around with a periscope sticking out of my head," said Harry. "I s'pose I could always attack someone in front of Moody; he might do it for me. . . ."

"I don't think he'd let you choose what you wanted to be turned into, though," said Hermione seriously. "No, I think your best chance is some sort of charm."

So Harry, thinking that he would soon have had enough of the

library to last him a lifetime, buried himself once more among the dusty volumes, looking for any spell that might enable a human to survive without oxygen. However, though he, Ron, and Hermione searched through their lunchtimes, evenings, and whole weekends — though Harry asked Professor McGonagall for a note of permission to use the Restricted Section, and even asked the irritable, vulture-like librarian, Madam Pince, for help — they found nothing whatsoever that would enable Harry to spend an hour underwater and live to tell the tale.

Familiar flutterings of panic were starting to disturb Harry now, and he was finding it difficult to concentrate in class again. The lake, which Harry had always taken for granted as just another feature of the grounds, drew his eyes whenever he was near a classroom window, a great, iron-gray mass of chilly water, whose dark and icy depths were starting to seem as distant as the moon.

Just as it had before he faced the Horntail, time was slipping away as though somebody had bewitched the clocks to go extra-fast. There was a week to go before February the twenty-fourth (there was still time) . . . there were five days to go (he was bound to find something soon) . . . three days to go (*please let me find something . . . please*) . . .

With two days left, Harry started to go off food again. The only good thing about breakfast on Monday was the return of the brown owl he had sent to Sirius. He pulled off the parchment, unrolled it, and saw the shortest letter Sirius had ever written to him.

Send date of next Hogsmeade weekend by return owl.

Harry turned the parchment over and looked at the back, hoping to see something else, but it was blank.

“Weekend after next,” whispered Hermione, who had read the note over Harry’s shoulder. “Here — take my quill and send this owl back straight away.”

Harry scribbled the dates down on the back of Sirius’s letter, tied it onto the brown owl’s leg, and watched it take flight again. What had he expected? Advice on how to survive underwater? He had been so intent on telling Sirius all about Snape and Moody he had completely forgotten to mention the egg’s clue.

“What’s he want to know about the next Hogsmeade weekend for?” said Ron.

“Dunno,” said Harry dully. The momentary happiness that had flared inside him at the sight of the owl had died. “Come on . . . Care of Magical Creatures.”

Whether Hagrid was trying to make up for the Blast-Ended Skrewts, or because there were now only two skrewts left, or because he was trying to prove he could do anything that Professor Grubbly-Plank could, Harry didn’t know, but Hagrid had been continuing her lessons on unicorns ever since he’d returned to work. It turned out that Hagrid knew quite as much about unicorns as he did about monsters, though it was clear that he found their lack of poisonous fangs disappointing.

Today he had managed to capture two unicorn foals. Unlike full-grown unicorns, they were pure gold. Parvati and Lavender went into transports of delight at the sight of them, and even Pansy Parkinson

had to work hard to conceal how much she liked them.

“Easier ter spot than the adults,” Hagrid told the class. “They turn silver when they’re abou’ two years old, an’ they grow horns at aroun’ four. Don’ go pure white till they’re full grown, ’round about seven. They’re a bit more trustin’ when they’re babies . . . don’ mind boys so much. . . . C’mon, move in a bit, yeh can pat ’em if yeh want . . . give ’em a few o’ these sugar lumps. . . .

“You okay, Harry?” Hagrid muttered, moving aside slightly, while most of the others swarmed around the baby unicorns.

“Yeah,” said Harry.

“Jus’ nervous, eh?” said Hagrid.

“Bit,” said Harry.

“Harry,” said Hagrid, clapping a massive hand on his shoulder, so that Harry’s knees buckled under its weight, “I’d’ve bin worried before I saw yeh take on tha’ Horntail, but I know now yeh can do anythin’ yeh set yer mind ter. I’m not worried at all. Yeh’re goin’ ter be fine. Got yer clue worked out, haven’ yeh?”

Harry nodded, but even as he did so, an insane urge to confess that he didn’t have any idea how to survive at the bottom of the lake for an hour came over him. He looked up at Hagrid — perhaps he had to go into the lake sometimes, to deal with the creatures in it? He looked after everything else on the grounds, after all —

“Yeh’re goin’ ter win,” Hagrid growled, patting Harry’s shoulder again, so that Harry actually felt himself sink a couple of inches into the soft ground. “I know it. I can feel it. *Yeh’re goin’ ter win, Harry.*”

Harry just couldn’t bring himself to wipe the happy, confident smile off Hagrid’s face. Pretending he was interested in the young

unicorns, he forced a smile in return, and moved forward to pat them with the others.

By the evening before the second task, Harry felt as though he were trapped in a nightmare. He was fully aware that even if, by some miracle, he managed to find a suitable spell, he'd have a real job mastering it overnight. How could he have let this happen? Why hadn't he got to work on the egg's clue sooner? Why had he ever let his mind wander in class — what if a teacher had once mentioned how to breathe underwater?

He sat with Hermione and Ron in the library as the sun set outside, tearing feverishly through page after page of spells, hidden from one another by the massive piles of books on the desk in front of each of them. Harry's heart gave a huge leap every time he saw the word "water" on a page, but more often than not it was merely "Take two pints of water, half a pound of shredded mandrake leaves, and a newt . . ."

"I don't reckon it can be done," said Ron's voice flatly from the other side of the table. "There's nothing. *Nothing*. Closest was that thing to dry up puddles and ponds, that Drought Charm, but that was nowhere near powerful enough to drain the lake."

"There must be something," Hermione muttered, moving a candle closer to her. Her eyes were so tired she was poring over the tiny print of *Olde and Forgotten Bewitchments and Charmes* with her nose about an inch from the page. "They'd never have set a task that was undoable."

"They have," said Ron. "Harry, just go down to the lake tomorrow,

right, stick your head in, yell at the merpeople to give back whatever they've nicked, and see if they chuck it out. Best you can do, mate."

"There's a way of doing it!" Hermione said crossly. "There just has to be!"

She seemed to be taking the library's lack of useful information on the subject as a personal insult; it had never failed her before.

"I know what I should have done," said Harry, resting, facedown, on *Saucy Tricks for Tricky Sorts*. "I should've learned to be an Animagus like Sirius."

An Animagus was a wizard who could transform into an animal.

"Yeah, you could've turned into a goldfish any time you wanted!" said Ron.

"Or a frog," yawned Harry. He was exhausted.

"It takes years to become an Animagus, and then you have to register yourself and everything," said Hermione vaguely, now squinting down the index of *Weird Wizarding Dilemmas and Their Solutions*. "Professor McGonagall told us, remember . . . you've got to register yourself with the Improper Use of Magic Office . . . what animal you become, and your markings, so you can't abuse it. . . ."

"Hermione, I was joking," said Harry wearily. "I know I haven't got a chance of turning into a frog by tomorrow morning. . . ."

"Oh this is no use," Hermione said, snapping shut *Weird Wizarding Dilemmas*. "Who on earth wants to make their nose hair grow into ringlets?"

"I wouldn't mind," said Fred Weasley's voice. "Be a talking point, wouldn't it?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked up. Fred and George had just

emerged from behind some bookshelves.

“What’re you two doing here?” Ron asked.

“Looking for you,” said George. “McGonagall wants you, Ron. And you, Hermione.”

“Why?” said Hermione, looking surprised.

“Dunno . . . she was looking a bit grim, though,” said Fred.

“We’re supposed to take you down to her office,” said George.

Ron and Hermione stared at Harry, who felt his stomach drop. Was Professor McGonagall about to tell Ron and Hermione off? Perhaps she’d noticed how much they were helping him, when he ought to be working out how to do the task alone?

“We’ll meet you back in the common room,” Hermione told Harry as she got up to go with Ron — both of them looked very anxious. “Bring as many of these books as you can, okay?”

“Right,” said Harry uneasily.

By eight o’clock, Madam Pince had extinguished all the lamps and came to chivvy Harry out of the library. Staggering under the weight of as many books as he could carry, Harry returned to the Gryffindor common room, pulled a table into a corner, and continued to search. There was nothing in *Madcap Magic for Wacky Warlocks* . . . nothing in *A Guide to Medieval Sorcery* . . . not one mention of underwater exploits in *An Anthology of Eighteenth-Century Charms*, or in *Dreadful Denizens of the Deep*, or *Powers You Never Knew You Had and What to Do with Them Now You’ve Wised Up*.

Crookshanks crawled into Harry’s lap and curled up, purring deeply. The common room emptied slowly around Harry. People kept wishing him luck for the next morning in cheery, confident voices like

Hagrid's, all of them apparently convinced that he was about to pull off another stunning performance like the one he had managed in the first task. Harry couldn't answer them, he just nodded, feeling as though there were a golf ball stuck in his throat. By ten to midnight, he was alone in the room with Crookshanks. He had searched all the remaining books, and Ron and Hermione had not come back.

It's over, he told himself. You can't do it. You'll just have to go down to the lake in the morning and tell the judges. . . .

He imagined himself explaining that he couldn't do the task. He pictured Bagman's look of round-eyed surprise, Karkaroff's satisfied, yellow-toothed smile. He could almost hear Fleur Delacour saying "*I knew it . . . 'e is too young, 'e is only a little boy.*" He saw Malfoy flashing his *POTTER STINKS* badge at the front of the crowd, saw Hagrid's crestfallen, disbelieving face. . . .

Forgetting that Crookshanks was on his lap, Harry stood up very suddenly; Crookshanks hissed angrily as he landed on the floor, gave Harry a disgusted look, and stalked away with his bottlebrush tail in the air, but Harry was already hurrying up the spiral staircase to his dormitory. . . . He would grab the Invisibility Cloak and go back to the library, he'd stay there all night if he had to. . . .

"*Lumos,*" Harry whispered fifteen minutes later as he opened the library door.

Wand-tip alight, he crept along the bookshelves, pulling down more books — books of hexes and charms, books on merpeople and water monsters, books on famous witches and wizards, on magical inventions, on anything at all that might include one passing reference to underwater survival. He carried them over to a table, then set to

work, searching them by the narrow beam of his wand, occasionally checking his watch. . . .

One in the morning . . . two in the morning . . . the only way he could keep going was to tell himself, over and over again, *next book . . . in the next one . . . the next one . . .*

The mermaid in the painting in the prefects' bathroom was laughing. Harry was bobbing like a cork in bubbly water next to her rock, while she held his Firebolt over his head.

"Come and get it!" she giggled maliciously. "Come on, jump!"

"I can't," Harry panted, snatching at the Firebolt, and struggling not to sink. "Give it to me!"

But she just poked him painfully in the side with the end of the broomstick, laughing at him.

"That hurts — get off — ouch —"

"Harry Potter must wake up, sir!"

"Stop poking me —"

"Dobby must poke Harry Potter, sir, he must wake up!"

Harry opened his eyes. He was still in the library; the Invisibility Cloak had slipped off his head as he'd slept, and the side of his face was stuck to the pages of *Where There's a Wand, There's a Way*. He sat up, straightening his glasses, blinking in the bright daylight.

"Harry Potter needs to hurry!" squeaked Dobby. "The second task starts in ten minutes, and Harry Potter —"

"Ten minutes?" Harry croaked. "Ten — *ten minutes?*"

He looked down at his watch. Dobby was right. It was twenty past nine. A large, dead weight seemed to fall through Harry's chest into

his stomach.

“Hurry, Harry Potter!” squeaked Dobby, plucking at Harry’s sleeve. “You is supposed to be down by the lake with the other champions, sir!”

“It’s too late, Dobby,” Harry said hopelessly. “I’m not doing the task, I don’t know how —”

“Harry Potter *will* do the task!” squeaked the elf. “Dobby knew Harry had not found the right book, so Dobby did it for him!”

“What?” said Harry. “But *you* don’t know what the second task is —”

“Dobby knows, sir! Harry Potter has to go into the lake and find his Wheezy —”

“Find my what?”

“— and take his Wheezy back from the merpeople!”

“What’s a Wheezy?”

“Your Wheezy, sir, your Wheezy — Wheezy who is giving Dobby his sweater!”

Dobby plucked at the shrunken maroon sweater he was now wearing over his shorts.

“*What?*” Harry gasped. “They’ve got . . . they’ve got *Ron?*”

“The thing Harry Potter will miss most, sir!” squeaked Dobby. “‘*But past an hour —*’”

“— ‘*the prospect’s black,*’” Harry recited, staring, horror-struck, at the elf. “‘*Too late, it’s gone, it won’t come back.*’ Dobby — what’ve I got to do?”

“You has to eat this, sir!” squeaked the elf, and he put his hand in

the pocket of his shorts and drew out a ball of what looked like slimy, grayish-green rat tails. “Right before you go into the lake, sir — gillyweed!”

“What’s it do?” said Harry, staring at the gillyweed.

“It will make Harry Potter breathe underwater, sir!”

“Dobby,” said Harry frantically, “listen — are you sure about this?”

He couldn’t quite forget that the last time Dobby had tried to “help” him, he had ended up with no bones in his right arm.

“Dobby is quite sure, sir!” said the elf earnestly. “Dobby hears things, sir, he is a house-elf, he goes all over the castle as he lights the fires and mops the floors. Dobby heard Professor McGonagall and Professor Moody in the staffroom, talking about the next task. . . . Dobby cannot let Harry Potter lose his Wheezy!”

Harry’s doubts vanished. Jumping to his feet he pulled off the Invisibility Cloak, stuffed it into his bag, grabbed the gillyweed, and put it into his pocket, then tore out of the library with Dobby at his heels.

“Dobby is supposed to be in the kitchens, sir!” Dobby squealed as they burst into the corridor. “Dobby will be missed — good luck, Harry Potter, sir, good luck!”

“See you later, Dobby!” Harry shouted, and he sprinted along the corridor and down the stairs, three at a time.

The entrance hall contained a few last-minute stragglers, all leaving the Great Hall after breakfast and heading through the double oak doors to watch the second task. They stared as Harry flashed past, sending Colin and Dennis Creevey flying as he leapt down the

stone steps and out onto the bright, chilly grounds.

As he pounded down the lawn he saw that the seats that had encircled the dragons' enclosure in November were now ranged along the opposite bank, rising in stands that were packed to the bursting point and reflected in the lake below. The excited babble of the crowd echoed strangely across the water as Harry ran flat-out around the other side of the lake toward the judges, who were sitting at another gold-draped table at the water's edge. Cedric, Fleur, and Krum were beside the judges' table, watching Harry sprint toward them.

"I'm . . . here . . ." Harry panted, skidding to a halt in the mud and accidentally splattering Fleur's robes.

"Where have you been?" said a bossy, disapproving voice. "The task's about to start!"

Harry looked around. Percy Weasley was sitting at the judges' table — Mr. Crouch had failed to turn up again.

"Now, now, Percy!" said Ludo Bagman, who was looking intensely relieved to see Harry. "Let him catch his breath!"

Dumbledore smiled at Harry, but Karkaroff and Madame Maxime didn't look at all pleased to see him. . . . It was obvious from the looks on their faces that they had thought he wasn't going to turn up.

Harry bent over, hands on his knees, gasping for breath; he had a stitch in his side that felt as though he had a knife between his ribs, but there was no time to get rid of it; Ludo Bagman was now moving among the champions, spacing them along the bank at intervals of ten feet. Harry was on the very end of the line, next to Krum, who was wearing swimming trunks and was holding his wand ready.

“All right, Harry?” Bagman whispered as he moved Harry a few feet farther away from Krum. “Know what you’re going to do?”

“Yeah,” Harry panted, massaging his ribs.

Bagman gave Harry’s shoulder a quick squeeze and returned to the judges’ table; he pointed his wand at his throat as he had done at the World Cup, said, “*Sonorus!*” and his voice boomed out across the dark water toward the stands.

“Well, all our champions are ready for the second task, which will start on my whistle. They have precisely an hour to recover what has been taken from them. On the count of three, then. One . . . two . . . *three!*”

The whistle echoed shrilly in the cold, still air; the stands erupted with cheers and applause; without looking to see what the other champions were doing, Harry pulled off his shoes and socks, pulled the handful of gillyweed out of his pocket, stuffed it into his mouth, and waded out into the lake.

It was so cold he felt the skin on his legs searing as though this were fire, not icy water. His sodden robes weighed him down as he walked in deeper; now the water was over his knees, and his rapidly numbing feet were slipping over silt and flat, slimy stones. He was chewing the gillyweed as hard and fast as he could; it felt unpleasantly slimy and rubbery, like octopus tentacles. Waist-deep in the freezing water he stopped, swallowed, and waited for something to happen.

He could hear laughter in the crowd and knew he must look stupid, walking into the lake without showing any sign of magical power. The part of him that was still dry was covered in goose pimples; half

immersed in the icy water, a cruel breeze lifting his hair, Harry started to shiver violently. He avoided looking at the stands; the laughter was becoming louder, and there were catcalls and jeering from the Slytherins. . . .

Then, quite suddenly, Harry felt as though an invisible pillow had been pressed over his mouth and nose. He tried to draw breath, but it made his head spin; his lungs were empty, and he suddenly felt a piercing pain on either side of his neck —

Harry clapped his hands around his throat and felt two large slits just below his ears, flapping in the cold air. . . . *He had gills.* Without pausing to think, he did the only thing that made sense — he flung himself forward into the water.

The first gulp of icy lake water felt like the breath of life. His head had stopped spinning; he took another great gulp of water and felt it pass smoothly through his gills, sending oxygen back to his brain. He stretched out his hands in front of him and stared at them. They looked green and ghostly under the water, and they had become webbed. He twisted around and looked at his bare feet — they had become elongated and the toes were webbed too: It looked as though he had sprouted flippers.

The water didn't feel icy anymore either . . . on the contrary, he felt pleasantly cool and very light. . . . Harry struck out once more, marveling at how far and fast his flipper-like feet propelled him through the water, and noticing how clearly he could see, and how he no longer seemed to need to blink. He had soon swum so far into the lake that he could no longer see the bottom. He flipped over and dived into its depths.

Silence pressed upon his ears as he soared over a strange, dark, foggy landscape. He could only see ten feet around him, so that as he sped through the water new scenes seemed to loom suddenly out of the oncoming darkness: forests of rippling, tangled black weed, wide plains of mud littered with dull, glimmering stones. He swam deeper and deeper, out toward the middle of the lake, his eyes wide, staring through the eerily gray-lit water around him to the shadows beyond, where the water became opaque.

Small fish flickered past him like silver darts. Once or twice he thought he saw something larger moving ahead of him, but when he got nearer, he discovered it to be nothing but a large, blackened log, or a dense clump of weed. There was no sign of any of the other champions, merpeople, Ron — nor, thankfully, the giant squid.

Light green weed stretched ahead of him as far as he could see, two feet deep, like a meadow of very overgrown grass. Harry was staring unblinkingly ahead of him, trying to discern shapes through the gloom . . . and then, without warning, something grabbed hold of his ankle.

Harry twisted his body around and saw a grindylow, a small, horned water demon, poking out of the weed, its long fingers clutched tightly around Harry's leg, its pointed fangs bared — Harry stuck his webbed hand quickly inside his robes and fumbled for his wand. By the time he had grasped it, two more grindylows had risen out of the weed, had seized handfuls of Harry's robes, and were attempting to drag him down.

"Relashio!" Harry shouted, except that no sound came out. . . . A large bubble issued from his mouth, and his wand, instead of sending

sparks at the grindylows, pelted them with what seemed to be a jet of boiling water, for where it struck them, angry red patches appeared on their green skin. Harry pulled his ankle out of the grindylo's grip and swam, as fast as he could, occasionally sending more jets of hot water over his shoulder at random; every now and then he felt one of the grindylows snatch at his foot again, and he kicked out, hard; finally, he felt his foot connect with a horned skull, and looking back, saw the dazed grindylo floating away, cross-eyed, while its fellows shook their fists at Harry and sank back into the weed.

Harry slowed down a little, slipped his wand back inside his robes, and looked around, listening again. He turned full circle in the water, the silence pressing harder than ever against his eardrums. He knew he must be even deeper in the lake now, but nothing was moving but the rippling weed.

“How are you getting on?”

Harry thought he was having a heart attack. He whipped around and saw Moaning Myrtle floating hazily in front of him, gazing at him through her thick, pearly glasses.

“Myrtle!” Harry tried to shout — but once again, nothing came out of his mouth but a very large bubble. Moaning Myrtle actually giggled.

“You want to try over there!” she said, pointing. “I won’t come with you. . . . I don’t like them much, they always chase me when I get too close. . . .”

Harry gave her the thumbs-up to show his thanks and set off once more, careful to swim a bit higher over the weed to avoid any more grindylows that might be lurking there.

He swam on for what felt like at least twenty minutes. He was passing over vast expanses of black mud now, which swirled murkily as he disturbed the water. Then, at long last, he heard a snatch of haunting mersong.

“An hour long you’ll have to look, And to recover what we took . . .”

Harry swam faster and soon saw a large rock emerge out of the muddy water ahead. It had paintings of merpeople on it; they were carrying spears and chasing what looked like the giant squid. Harry swam on past the rock, following the mersong.

“. . . your time’s half gone, so tarry not Lest what you seek stays here to rot. . . .”

A cluster of crude stone dwellings stained with algae loomed suddenly out of the gloom on all sides. Here and there at the dark windows, Harry saw faces . . . faces that bore no resemblance at all to the painting of the mermaid in the prefects’ bathroom. . . .

The merpeople had grayish skin and long, wild, dark green hair. Their eyes were yellow, as were their broken teeth, and they wore thick ropes of pebbles around their necks. They leered at Harry as he swam past; one or two of them emerged from their caves to watch him better, their powerful, silver fish tails beating the water, spears clutched in their hands.

Harry sped on, staring around, and soon the dwellings became more numerous; there were gardens of weed around some of them,

and he even saw a pet grindylow tied to a stake outside one door. Merpeople were emerging on all sides now, watching him eagerly, pointing at his webbed hands and gills, talking behind their hands to one another. Harry sped around a corner and a very strange sight met his eyes.

A whole crowd of merpeople was floating in front of the houses that lined what looked like a mer-version of a village square. A choir of merpeople was singing in the middle, calling the champions toward them, and behind them rose a crude sort of statue; a gigantic merperson hewn from a boulder. Four people were bound tightly to the tail of the stone merperson.

Ron was tied between Hermione and Cho Chang. There was also a girl who looked no older than eight, whose clouds of silvery hair made Harry feel sure that she was Fleur Delacour's sister. All four of them appeared to be in a very deep sleep. Their heads were lolling onto their shoulders, and fine streams of bubbles kept issuing from their mouths.

Harry sped toward the hostages, half expecting the merpeople to lower their spears and charge at him, but they did nothing. The ropes of weed tying the hostages to the statue were thick, slimy, and very strong. For a fleeting second he thought of the knife Sirius had bought him for Christmas — locked in his trunk in the castle a quarter of a mile away, no use to him whatsoever.

He looked around. Many of the merpeople surrounding them were carrying spears. He swam swiftly toward a seven-foot-tall merman with a long green beard and a choker of shark fangs and tried to mime a request to borrow the spear. The merman laughed and shook his

head.

“We do not help,” he said in a harsh, croaky voice.

“Come *ON!*” Harry said fiercely (but only bubbles issued from his mouth), and he tried to pull the spear away from the merman, but the merman yanked it back, still shaking his head and laughing.

Harry swirled around, staring about. Something sharp . . . anything . . .

There were rocks littering the lake bottom. He dived and snatched up a particularly jagged one and returned to the statue. He began to hack at the ropes binding Ron, and after several minutes’ hard work, they broke apart. Ron floated, unconscious, a few inches above the lake bottom, drifting a little in the ebb of the water.

Harry looked around. There was no sign of any of the other champions. What were they playing at? Why didn’t they hurry up? He turned back to Hermione, raised the jagged rock, and began to hack at her bindings too —

At once, several pairs of strong gray hands seized him. Half a dozen mermen were pulling him away from Hermione, shaking their green-haired heads, and laughing.

“You take your own hostage,” one of them said to him. “Leave the others . . .”

“No way!” said Harry furiously — but only two large bubbles came out.

“Your task is to retrieve your own friend . . . leave the others . . .”

“*She’s* my friend too!” Harry yelled, gesturing toward Hermione, an enormous silver bubble emerging soundlessly from his lips. “And I don’t want *them* to die either!”

Cho's head was on Hermione's shoulder; the small silver-haired girl was ghostly green and pale. Harry struggled to fight off the mermen, but they laughed harder than ever, holding him back. Harry looked wildly around. Where were the other champions? Would he have time to take Ron to the surface and come back down for Hermione and the others? Would he be able to find them again? He looked down at his watch to see how much time was left — it had stopped working.

But then the merpeople around him started pointing excitedly over his head. Harry looked up and saw Cedric swimming toward them. There was an enormous bubble around his head, which made his features look oddly wide and stretched.

“Got lost!” he mouthed, looking panic-stricken. “Fleur and Krum’re coming now!”

Feeling enormously relieved, Harry watched Cedric pull a knife out of his pocket and cut Cho free. He pulled her upward and out of sight.

Harry looked around, waiting. Where were Fleur and Krum? Time was getting short, and according to the song, the hostages would be lost after an hour. . . .

The merpeople started screeching animatedly. Those holding Harry loosened their grip, staring behind them. Harry turned and saw something monstrous cutting through the water toward them: a human body in swimming trunks with the head of a shark. . . . It was Krum. He appeared to have transfigured himself — but badly.

The shark-man swam straight to Hermione and began snapping and biting at her ropes; the trouble was that Krum's new teeth were

positioned very awkwardly for biting anything smaller than a dolphin, and Harry was quite sure that if Krum wasn't careful, he was going to rip Hermione in half. Darting forward, Harry hit Krum hard on the shoulder and held up the jagged stone. Krum seized it and began to cut Hermione free. Within seconds, he had done it; he grabbed Hermione around the waist, and without a backward glance, began to rise rapidly with her toward the surface.

Now what? Harry thought desperately. If he could be sure that Fleur was coming. . . . But still no sign. There was nothing to be done except . . .

He snatched up the stone, which Krum had dropped, but the mermen now closed in around Ron and the little girl, shaking their heads at him. Harry pulled out his wand.

“Get out of the way!”

Only bubbles flew out of his mouth, but he had the distinct impression that the mermen had understood him, because they suddenly stopped laughing. Their yellowish eyes were fixed upon Harry's wand, and they looked scared. There might be a lot more of them than there were of him, but Harry could tell, by the looks on their faces, that they knew no more magic than the giant squid did.

“You've got until three!” Harry shouted; a great stream of bubbles burst from him, but he held up three fingers to make sure they got the message. “One . . .” (he put down a finger) “two . . .” (he put down a second one) —

They scattered. Harry darted forward and began to hack at the ropes binding the small girl to the statue, and at last she was free. He seized the little girl around the waist, grabbed the neck of Ron's

robes, and kicked off from the bottom.

It was very slow work. He could no longer use his webbed hands to propel himself forward; he worked his flippers furiously, but Ron and Fleur's sister were like potato-filled sacks dragging him back down. . . . He fixed his eyes skyward, though he knew he must still be very deep, the water above him was so dark. . . .

Merpeople were rising with him. He could see them swirling around him with ease, watching him struggle through the water. . . . Would they pull him back down to the depths when the time was up? Did they perhaps eat humans? Harry's legs were seizing up with the effort to keep swimming; his shoulders were aching horribly with the effort of dragging Ron and the girl. . . .

He was drawing breath with extreme difficulty. He could feel pain on the sides of his neck again . . . he was becoming very aware of how wet the water was in his mouth . . . yet the darkness was definitely thinning now . . . he could see daylight above him. . . .

He kicked hard with his flippers and discovered that they were nothing more than feet . . . water was flooding through his mouth into his lungs . . . he was starting to feel dizzy, but he knew light and air were only ten feet above him . . . he had to get there . . . he had to . . .

Harry kicked his legs so hard and fast it felt as though his muscles were screaming in protest; his very brain felt waterlogged, he couldn't breathe, he needed oxygen, he had to keep going, he could not stop —

And then he felt his head break the surface of the lake; wonderful, cold, clear air was making his wet face sting; he gulped it down, feeling as though he had never breathed properly before, and,

panting, pulled Ron and the little girl up with him. All around him, wild, green-haired heads were emerging out of the water with him, but they were smiling at him.

The crowd in the stands was making a great deal of noise; shouting and screaming, they all seemed to be on their feet; Harry had the impression they thought that Ron and the little girl might be dead, but they were wrong . . . both of them had opened their eyes; the girl looked scared and confused, but Ron merely expelled a great spout of water, blinked in the bright light, turned to Harry, and said, “Wet, this, isn’t it?” Then he spotted Fleur’s sister. “What did you bring her for?”

“Fleur didn’t turn up, I couldn’t leave her,” Harry panted.

“Harry, you prat,” said Ron, “you didn’t take that song thing seriously, did you? Dumbledore wouldn’t have let any of us drown!”

“The song said —”

“It was only to make sure you got back inside the time limit!” said Ron. “I hope you didn’t waste time down there acting the hero!”

Harry felt both stupid and annoyed. It was all very well for Ron; *he’d* been asleep, he hadn’t felt how eerie it was down in the lake, surrounded by spear-carrying merpeople who’d looked more than capable of murder.

“C’mon,” Harry said shortly, “help me with her, I don’t think she can swim very well.”

They pulled Fleur’s sister through the water, back toward the bank where the judges stood watching, twenty merpeople accompanying them like a guard of honor, singing their horrible screechy songs.

Harry could see Madam Pomfrey fussing over Hermione, Krum,

Cedric, and Cho, all of whom were wrapped in thick blankets. Dumbledore and Ludo Bagman stood beaming at Harry and Ron from the bank as they swam nearer, but Percy, who looked very white and somehow much younger than usual, came splashing out to meet them. Meanwhile Madame Maxime was trying to restrain Fleur Delacour, who was quite hysterical, fighting tooth and nail to return to the water.

“Gabrielle! *Gabrielle! Is she alive? Is she hurt?*”

“She’s fine!” Harry tried to tell her, but he was so exhausted he could hardly talk, let alone shout.

Percy seized Ron and was dragging him back to the bank (“Gerroff, Percy, I’m all right!”); Dumbledore and Bagman were pulling Harry upright; Fleur had broken free of Madame Maxime and was hugging her sister.

“It was ze grindylows . . . zey attacked me . . . oh Gabrielle, I thought . . . I thought . . .”

“Come here, you,” said Madam Pomfrey. She seized Harry and pulled him over to Hermione and the others, wrapped him so tightly in a blanket that he felt as though he were in a straitjacket, and forced a measure of very hot potion down his throat. Steam gushed out of his ears.

“Harry, well done!” Hermione cried. “You did it, you found out how all by yourself!”

“Well —” said Harry. He would have told her about Dobby, but he had just noticed Karkaroff watching him. He was the only judge who had not left the table; the only judge not showing signs of pleasure and relief that Harry, Ron, and Fleur’s sister had got back safely.

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Harry, raising his voice slightly so that Karkaroff could hear him.

“You haff a water beetle in your hair, Herm-own-ninny,” said Krum. Harry had the impression that Krum was drawing her attention back onto himself; perhaps to remind her that he had just rescued her from the lake, but Hermione brushed away the beetle impatiently and said, “You’re well outside the time limit, though, Harry. . . . Did it take you ages to find us?”

“No . . . I found you okay. . . .”

Harry’s feeling of stupidity was growing. Now he was out of the water, it seemed perfectly clear that Dumbledore’s safety precautions wouldn’t have permitted the death of a hostage just because their champion hadn’t turned up. Why hadn’t he just grabbed Ron and gone? He would have been first back. . . . Cedric and Krum hadn’t wasted time worrying about anyone else; they hadn’t taken the mersong seriously. . . .

Dumbledore was crouching at the water’s edge, deep in conversation with what seemed to be the chief merperson, a particularly wild and ferocious-looking female. He was making the same sort of screechy noises that the merpeople made when they were above water; clearly, Dumbledore could speak Mermish. Finally he straightened up, turned to his fellow judges, and said, “A conference before we give the marks, I think.”

The judges went into a huddle. Madam Pomfrey had gone to rescue Ron from Percy’s clutches; she led him over to Harry and the others, gave him a blanket and some Pepperup Potion, then went to fetch Fleur and her sister. Fleur had many cuts on her face and arms and

her robes were torn, but she didn't seem to care, nor would she allow Madam Pomfrey to clean them.

"Look after Gabrielle," she told her, and then she turned to Harry. "You saved 'er," she said breathlessly. "Even though she was not your 'ostage."

"Yeah," said Harry, who was now heartily wishing he'd left all three girls tied to the statue.

Fleur bent down, kissed Harry twice on each cheek (he felt his face burn and wouldn't have been surprised if steam was coming out of his ears again), then said to Ron, "And you too — you 'elped —"

"Yeah," said Ron, looking extremely hopeful, "yeah, a bit —"

Fleur swooped down on him too and kissed him. Hermione looked simply furious, but just then, Ludo Bagman's magically magnified voice boomed out beside them, making them all jump, and causing the crowd in the stands to go very quiet.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have reached our decision. Merchieftainess Murcus has told us exactly what happened at the bottom of the lake, and we have therefore decided to award marks out of fifty for each of the champions, as follows. . . .

"Fleur Delacour, though she demonstrated excellent use of the Bubble-Head Charm, was attacked by grindylows as she approached her goal, and failed to retrieve her hostage. We award her twenty-five points."

Applause from the stands.

"I deserved zero," said Fleur throatily, shaking her magnificent head.

"Cedric Diggory, who also used the Bubble-Head Charm, was

first to return with his hostage, though he returned one minute outside the time limit of an hour.” Enormous cheers from the Hufflepuffs in the crowd; Harry saw Cho give Cedric a glowing look. “We therefore award him forty-seven points.”

Harry’s heart sank. If Cedric had been outside the time limit, he most certainly had been.

“Viktor Krum used an incomplete form of Transfiguration, which was nevertheless effective, and was second to return with his hostage. We award him forty points.”

Karkaroff clapped particularly hard, looking very superior.

“Harry Potter used gillyweed to great effect,” Bagman continued. “He returned last, and well outside the time limit of an hour. However, the Merchieftainess informs us that Mr. Potter was first to reach the hostages, and that the delay in his return was due to his determination to return all hostages to safety, not merely his own.”

Ron and Hermione both gave Harry half-exasperated, half-commiserating looks.

“Most of the judges,” and here, Bagman gave Karkaroff a very nasty look, “feel that this shows moral fiber and merits full marks. However . . . Mr. Potter’s score is forty-five points.”

Harry’s stomach leapt — he was now tying for first place with *Cedric*. Ron and Hermione, caught by surprise, stared at Harry, then laughed and started applauding hard with the rest of the crowd.

“There you go, Harry!” Ron shouted over the noise. “You weren’t being thick after all — you were showing moral fiber!”

Fleur was clapping very hard too, but Krum didn’t look happy at all. He attempted to engage Hermione in conversation again, but she

was too busy cheering Harry to listen.

“The third and final task will take place at dusk on the twenty-fourth of June,” continued Bagman. “The champions will be notified of what is coming precisely one month beforehand. Thank you all for your support of the champions.”

It was over, Harry thought dazedly, as Madam Pomfrey began herding the champions and hostages back to the castle to get into dry clothes . . . it was over, he had got through . . . he didn’t have to worry about anything now until June the twenty-fourth. . . .

Next time he was in Hogsmeade, Harry decided as he walked back up the stone steps into the castle, he was going to buy Dobby a pair of socks for every day of the year.

Die Tweede Taak

“Jy’t dan gesê jy’t die eierleidraad al uitgewerk!” sê Hermien verontwaardig.

“Moenie so hard praat nie!” sê Harry vererg. “Ek moes dit net soort van – verfyn, sien?”

Hy, Ron en Hermien sit alleen by ’n tafel agterin die Towerspreuk-klas. Hulle is veronderstel om vandag die teenoorgestelde van die Ontbiedtoewerspreuk te oefen – die Verdryftowerspreuk. Weens die moontlikheid van lelike ongelukke wanneer allerhande voorwerpe deur die klaskamer vlieg, het professor Flickerpitt vir elke student ’n stapel kussings gegee om mee te oefen. Die teorie is dat die kussings niemand sal seermaak as hulle van koers af is nie. Dit is ’n goeie teorie, maar dit werk nie juis nie. Neville mik so sleg dat hy baie swaarder voorwerpe gedurig per ongeluk oor die vertrek laat vlieg – soos byvoorbeeld professor Flickerpitt.

“Vergeet net vir ’n oomblik van die eier, oukei?” fluister Harry toe professor Flickerpitt gelate verby hulle trek en bo-op ’n hoë kas beland. “Ek probeer om julle van Snerp en Moodie te vertel . . .”

Die klas bied die ideale dekmantel vir ’n privaat gesprek omdat almal te veel pret het om hulle aan enigiemand anders te steur. Harry is reeds vir die laaste halfuur besig om Ron en Hermien in ’n fluisterstem van sy avonture van die vorige aand te vertel.

“Snerp het dus gesê dat Moodie sy kantoor ook deurgesoek het?” fluister Ron en sy oë skitter van belangstelling terwyl hy ’n kussing met ’n swiep van sy towerstaf Verdryf (dit trek hoog die lug in en stamp Parvati se hoed af). “Wat . . . dink jy Moodie is hier om ’n ogie oor Snerp sowel as oor Karkaroff te hou?”

“Wel, ek weet nie of Dompeldorius gesê het dat hy dit moet doen nie, maar hy doen dit beslis,” sê Harry wat sy towerstaf op ’n agtelosige manier waai sodat sy kussing ’n snaakse soort maaglanding op die lessenaar maak. “Moodie het gesê dat Dompeldorius net vir Snerp hier laat bly omdat hy hom ’n tweede kans of iets gee . . .”

“Wat?” sê Ron en sy oë rek. Sy volgende kussing tol hoog die lug in, bons van die kandelaar af weg en val swaar op Flickerpitt se tafel. “Har-

ry . . . dalk dink Moodie dat *Snerp* jou naam in die Beker Vol Vuur gesit het!”

“Ag, Ron,” sê Hermien en sy skud haar kop skepties, “ons het al voorheen gedink dat *Snerp* vir Harry wil doodmaak en toe het hy Harry se lewe gered, onthou?”

Sy Verdryf ’n kussing en dit vlieg oor die vertrek en val in die boks waarna hulle veronderstel is om te mik. Harry kyk na Hermien terwyl hy dink . . . dat dit waar is dat *Snerp* sy lewe een keer gered het, maar dat *Snerp* hom beslis haat, net soos hy Harry se pa gehaat het toe hulle saam op skool was. *Snerp* hou daarvan om vir Harry punte af te trek en hy sal nooit ’n kans deur sy vingers laat glip om hom te straf of om voor te stel dat hy geskors word nie.

“Ek gee nie om wat Moodie sê nie,” gaan Hermien voort, “maar Dompeuldorius is nie onnosel nie. Hy het Hagrid en professor Lupin met reg vertrou, al sou tonne mense dalk nie vir hulle werk gegee het nie, hoekom sal hy dan nie oor *Snerp* ook reg wees nie, al is *Snerp* miskien ’n bietjie –”

– duiwels,” sê Ron onmiddellik. “Komaan, Hermien, hoekom deursoek al hierdie Donkertowenaarvangers dan sy kantoor, h’m?”

“Hoekom maak mnr. Crouch of hy siek is?” sê Hermien wat vir Ron ignoreer. “Dis nogal snaaks, nè, dat hy nie na die Kersbal kan kom nie, maar net wanneer hy wil, in die middel van die nag, hierheen kan kom?”

“Jy hou net nie van Crouch nie oor daardie elf, Knipogies,” sê Ron en hy laat ’n kussing deur die venster seil.

“Jy wil weer net glo dat *Snerp* met iets onderduims besig is,” sê Hermien terwyl haar kussing netjies boks toe vlieg.

“Wat ek wil weet, is wat *Snerp* met sy eerste kans gemaak het om nou sy tweede een te kry,” sê Harry grimmig toe sy kussing, tot sy verbasing, reguit oor die kamer trek en netjies bo-op Hermien s’n land.

Gedagtig aan Sirius se wens dat hy van alles wat vreemd is by Hogwarts wil weet, stuur Harry daardie nag vir hom ’n brief met ’n bruin uil waarin hy vertel hoe mnr. Crouch by *Snerp* se kantoor ingebreek het, asook alles oor *Snerp* en Moodie se gesprek. Daarna gee Harry sy aandag in alle erns aan die dringendste probleem van almal: hoe om op die vier-en-twintigste Februarie vir ’n uur onder die water aan die lewe te bly.

Ron hou baie van die idee om weer ’n Ontbiedtowerspreuk te gebruik – Harry het iets oor duiklonge gesê en Ron kan glad nie verstaan hoekom Harry nie ’n duiklong van die naaste Moggeldorp af kan toor nie. Hermien vernietig hierdie plan toe sy daarop wys dat indien Harry dit wel sou regkry om binne ’n uur te leer hoe om die duiklong te gebruik, hy beslis gediskwalifiseer sal word vir die oortreding van die Internasionale Kode op Towenaarsgeheimhouding – dit is te veel om te verwag dat

Moggels nie 'n duiklong wat deur die lug na Hogwarts toe trek, sal sien nie.

“Die ideale oplossing sal natuurlik wees om jouself in 'n duikboot of iets te Transfigureer,” sê sy. “As ons tog net al menslike Transfigurاسies gedoen het! Maar ek het 'n gevoel dat ons eers in ons sesde jaar daarmee gaan begin en dit kan lelik skeef loop as jy nie weet wat jy doen nie . . .”

“Ja, ek's nie lus om rond te loop met 'n periskoop wat uit my kop steek nie,” sê Harry. “Ek kan seker altyd iemand voor Moodie aanrand, hy sal dit dalk vir my doen . . .”

“Ek dink nie hy sal jou laat kies wat jy wil word nie,” sê Hermien ernstig. “Nee, ek dink die een of ander soort towerspreuk is jou beste kans.”

Dus moet Harry, wat voel dat hy vir die res van sy lewe nie weer 'n biblioteek wil sien nie, homself weer eens tussen die stowwerige volumes gaan begrawe op soek na 'n towerspel wat 'n mens in staat sal stel om sonder suurstof aan die lewe te bly. Hoewel sowel hy as Ron en Hermien tydens middagetes, saans en oor naweke soek, en hoewel Harry vir professor McGonagall 'n verlofbriefie vra om in die Beperkte Afdeling te mag kyk en selfs die prikkelbare, aasvoëlartige bibliotekaresse, Madame Pince, se hulp inroep, kry hulle hoegenaamd niks wat Harry sal help om 'n uur onder die water te bly en dit te oorleef nie.

Bekende tintelings van paniek begin Harry nou weer pla en dis vir hom moeilik om in die klas te konsentreer. Die meer, wat Harry nog altyd net vanselfsprekend as 'n verskynsel op die terrein aanvaar het, trek nou sy aandag elke keer dat hy naby 'n klaskamervenster sit: 'n groot, staalgrys massa koue water waarvan die donker, ysige dieptes so ver soos die maan begin voel.

Die tyd glip verby asof iemand die klokke getoor het om ekstra vinnig te loop, net soos toe hy teen die Horingstert te staan gekom het. Daar is 'n week oor voor die vier-en-twintigste Februarie (daar is nog tyd) . . . daar is vyf dae oor (hy móét net binnekort 'n oplossing vind) . . . nog drie dae (asseblief, laat ek aan iets dink . . . asseblief . . .).

Toe daar twee dae oor is, kan Harry sy kos nie meer inkry nie. Daardie Maandag tydens ontbyt is die enigste goeie ding die aankoms van die bruin uil wat hy vir Sirius gestuur het. Hy haal die perkament af, rol dit oop en sien die kortste briefie wat Sirius nog ooit vir hom geskryf het.

Stuur datum van volgende Hogsmeade-besoek per kerende uil.

Harry draai die perkament om en kyk na die agterkant in die hoop om nog iets te sien, maar daar is niks.

“Naweek na volgende,” fluister Hermien wat die nota oor Harry se skouer gelees het. “Hier – vat my veerpen en stuur die uil dadelik terug.”

Harry krabbel die datum op die agterkant van Sirius se brief, bind dit

weer aan die bruin uil se been vas en kyk hoe dit wegvlieg. Wat het hy verwag? Raad oor hoe om onder water aan die lewe te bly? Hy was so gretig om vir Sirius alles oor Snerp en Moodie te vertel dat hy heeltemal vergeet het om iets oor die eierleidraad te sê.

“Hoekom wil hy weet wanneer die volgende Hogsmeade-naweek is?” vra Ron.

“Weet nie,” sê Harry dofweg. Die kortstondige gevoel van vreugde wat in hom opgewel het toe hy die uil gesien het, het weggesteef. “Komaan . . . Versorging van Magiese Kreature.”

Harry sal seker nooit weet of Hagrid vir die Spuitstertkrewels probeer vergoed het en of dit is omdat daar nog net twee Krewels oor is en of hy probeer bewys dat hy enigiets wat professor Growweblaar doen, ook kan doen nie, maar na sy terugkoms sit hy haar lesse oor eenhorings voort. Dit blyk dat Hagrid net soveel oor eenhorings weet as oor monsters, hoewel dit ook duidelik blyk dat hy teleurgesteld is omdat hulle nie giftande het nie.

Vir vandag se les het hy twee eenhoringvulletjies gevang. Anders as volgroeide eenhorings is hulle ’n suiwer goudkleur. Parvati en Hildegard raak in vervoering toe hulle die vulletjies sien en selfs Pansy Parkinson sukkel om nie te wys hoe oulik hulle vir haar is nie.

“Makliker om raak te sien as die volwassenes,” sê Hagrid vir die klas. “Hulle word silwer wanneer hulle omtrent twee jaar oud is en hulle kry hul horings hier so by vier jaar. Word nie suiwer wit voor hulle so teen sewe jaar uitgegroeï is nie. Hulle het ’n bietjie meer vertroue as hulle babas is . . . nie so erg teen seuns gekant nie . . . komaan, kom nader, julle kan hulle streel as julle wil . . . gee vir hulle van hierdie suikerklonte . . .

“Is jy oukêi, Harry?” mompel Hagrid en hy staan effens eenkant toe terwyl die meeste van die ander ouens om die eenhorinkies swerm.

“Ja,” sê Harry.

“Net senuagtig, hè?” sê Hagrid.

“’n Bietjie,” sê Harry.

“Harry,” sê Hagrid en hy sit sy massiewe hand op Harry se skouer sodat Harry se knieë onder die gewig knak, “ek was so ietwat bekommerd voor ek jou daardie Horingstert sien aanvat het, maar nou weet ek dat jy enigiets kan doen as jy net wil. Ek is niks meer bekommerd nie. Jy gaan orraait wees. Het jy jou leidraad al uitgewerk, hè?”

Harry knik, maar toe hy dit doen, is hy skielik verskrriklik lus om te erken dat hy nie ’n idee het hoe hy vir langer as ’n uur onder in die meer aan die lewe gaan bly nie. Hy kyk op na Hagrid – dalk moet hy soms afgaan in die meer om iets met die dierasies wat daar hou te gaan doen? Hy sorg mos vir alles op die terrein –

“Jy gaan wen,” grom Hagrid en hy klap Harry weer op die skouer sodat

Harry voel hoe hy 'n ent in die modderige grond wegsink. "Ek weet dit. Kan dit voel. Jy gaan wen, Harry."

Harry kan homself net nie sover bring om die gelukkige, tevrede glimlag van Hagrid se gesig af te vee nie. Onder die voorwendsel dat hy na die jong eenhorings wil kyk, dwing hy homself om terug te glimlag en tree dan vorentoe om hulle saam met die ander te steel.

Op die vooraand van die tweede taak voel dit vir Harry asof hy in 'n nagmerrie vasgevang is. Hy is ten volle daarvan bewus dat, selfs indien 'n wonderwerk sou gebeur en hy 'n geskikte towerspreuk kry, hy omtrent al sukkel om dit oornag te leer doen. Hoekom het hy dinge laat slap lê? Hoekom het hy nie gouer aan die eier se leidraad begin werk nie? Hoekom het hy sy gedagtes in die klas laat dwaal – wat as 'n onderwyser dalk al iets genoem het oor hoe 'n mens onder die water kan asemhaal?

Toe die son ondergaan, sit hy, Ron en Hermien in die biblioteek, versteek agter massiewe stapels boeke op die lessenaars voor elkeen van hulle. Hulle blaai koorsagtig deur bladsye towerspreuke. Harry se hart gee 'n groot sprong elke keer dat hy die woord "water" iewers sien, maar dit is gewoonlik bloot iets soos "Neem twee liter water, 'n halwe kilogram gesnipperde alruinblare en 'n watersalamander . . ."

"Ek dink nie 'n mens kan dit doen nie," kom Ron se moedelse stem van die ander kant van die tafel af. "Hier's niks. Niks. Die naaste is daardie ding om poele en plasse mee op te droog, daardie Droogtespreuk, maar dis nie naastenby sterk genoeg om die meer mee leeg te maak nie."

"Daar moet iets wees," mompel Hermien terwyl sy 'n kers nader trek. Haar oë is so moeg dat sy die klein druk van *Oude en Vergote Towerspreuke en Sjarmes* net kan lees deur haar neus omtrent 'n sentimeter van die bladsy af te hou. "Hulle sou nooit 'n taak gegee het wat 'n mens nie kan doen nie."

"Hulle het," sê Ron. "Harry, gaan môre af meer toe, nè, dan steek jy jou kop in en skree vir die meermense om dit wat hulle gevat het, terug te gee en dan kyk jy of hulle dit uitsmyt. Dis al wat jy kan doen, maat."

"Daar is 'n manier om dit te doen!" sê Hermien kwaai. "Daar moet net wees!"

Dit lyk asof sy die biblioteek se gebrek aan bruikbare inligting oor die onderwerp persoonlik opneem; dit het haar nog nooit tevore in die steek gelaat nie.

"Ek weet wat ek moes gedoen het," sê Harry terwyl hy sy kop op *Poetse vir Platjies* laat sak. "Ek moes geleer het om 'n Animagus te wees, soos Sirius."

"Ja, dan kan jy in 'n goudvis verander net wanneer jy wil!" sê Ron.

"Of 'n padda," gaap Harry wat nou pootuit is.

"Dit vat jare om 'n Animagus te word en jy moet jouself registreer en

alles,” sê Hermien floutjies van waar sy skeeloog na die inhoudsopgawe van *Eienaardige Towerdilemmas en Hul Oplossings* staar. “Professor McGonagall het nog vir ons vertel, onthou julle . . . jy moet jouself by die kantoor vir die Onbehoorlike Gebruik van die Towerkuns registreer . . . watter dier jy word en watter merktekens jy het sodat jy dit nie kan misbruik nie . . .”

“Hermien, dit was net ’n grap,” sê Harry moeg. “Ek weet ek het nie ’n kans om teen môreoggend in ’n padda te kan verander nie . . .”

“O, dit is nou regtig tydmors,” sê Hermien terwyl sy *Eienaardige Towerdilemmas* toeklap. “Wie op aarde sal hul neushare in krulletjies wil laat groei?”

“Ek sal nie omgee nie,” sê Fred Weasley se stem. “Sal heeltemal iets wees om oor te gesels, nie waar nie?”

Harry, Ron en Hermien kyk op. Fred en George het so pas van agter die boekrakke verskyn.

“Wat maak julle twee hier?” vra Ron.

“Soek vir jou,” sê George. “McGonagall wil jou sien, Ron. En vir jou, Hermien.”

“Hoekom?” sê Hermien en sy lyk verbaas.

“Weet nie . . . sy’t nogal omgekras gelyk,” sê Fred.

“Ons moet julle na haar kantoor neem,” sê George.

Ron en Hermien staar na Harry wat voel hoe sy maag ruk. Gaan professor McGonagall met Ron en Hermien raas? Het sy agtergekom hoeveel hulle hom help terwyl hy die taak eintlik alleen moet doen?

“Ons sien jou netnou in die geselskamer,” sê Hermien vir Harry toe sy opstaan om saam met Ron uit te stap – albei van hulle lyk baie benoud. “Neem soveel van hierdie boeke as wat jy kan, oukei?”

“Goed,” sê Harry onrustig.

Teen agtuur maak Madame Pince al die lampe dood en jaag vir Harry uit die biblioteek. Harry steier onder die gewig van al die boeke wat hy probeer saamdra toe hy terugstap na die Griffindor-geselskamer waar hy ’n tafel in ’n hoek trek en met sy soektog voortgaan. Daar is niks in *Grappige Paljasse vir Stuitige Grappasse* nie . . . niks in ’n *Gids tot Middeljarige Towerkuns* nie . . . geen onderwaterse kordaatstukke word in ’n *Bloemlesing van Agtiende-eeuse Towerspreuke* genoem nie en ook nie in *Woeste Wesens van die Waters* of in *Magte Waaroor Jy Beskik Waarvan Jy Nooit Geweet Het Nie en Wat om Daarmee te Doen Noudat Jy Weet* nie.

Kromskeen krul in Harry se skoot op en gaan lustig aan die spin. Die geselskamer is besig om stadigaan leeg te loop. Mense wens hom sterkte toe vir die volgende dag in vrolike, selfversekerde stemme net soos Hagrid s’n. Dit lyk asof almal dink dat hy, soos met die eerste taak, die een of ander ongelooflike vertoning uit sy hoed gaan haal. Harry kan hulle nie antwoord nie, hy knik bloot. Dit voel asof ’n gholfbal in sy keel vas-

sil. Teen tien minute minute te voor twaalf is hy en Kromskeen alleen in die vertrek. Hy het al die oorblywende boeke deurgegaan en Ron en Hermien is nog nie terug nie.

Dis nag, sê hy vir homself. Jy kan dit nie doen nie. Jy sal net eenvoudig môreoggend na die meer moet gaan en vir die beoordelaars moet sê . . .

Hy kan homself net sien verduidelik dat hy nie die taak kan doen nie. Hy sien Bagman se oë, rond van verbasing, Karkaroff se tevrede, geeltandige glimlag. Hy kan Fleur Delacour amper hoor sê, "Ek het geweet . . . hy's te jonk, hy's net 'n klein seuntjie." Hy sien hoe Malfoy sy POTTER STINK-wapen vir die skare flits, sien Hagrid se teleurgestelde, ongelowige gesig . . .

Harry vergeet skoon dat Kromskeen op sy skoot sit toe hy skielik opstaan; Kromskeen sis vererg toe hy op die vloer beland, kyk vies na Harry en stap weg met sy borselstert hoog in die lug. Harry is egter reeds besig om haastig met die wenteltrap op te draf . . . hy wil die onsigbaarheidsmantel in die slaapsaal gaan haal en terug biblioteek toe gaan. As dit moet, sal hy die hele nag wakker bly . . .

"Lumos," fluister Harry 'n kwartier later toe hy die biblioteek se deur oopstoot.

In die lig wat van die punt van sy towerstaf af kom, sluip hy tussen die boekrakke deur op soek na nog boeke – boeke oor towerspele en -spreuke, boeke oor meermense en watermonsters, boeke oor beroemde hekse en towenaars, oor toweruitvindings, oor enigiets wat dalk na onderwaterse oorlewing kan verwys. Hy dra almal na 'n tafel en begin werk, blaai in die klein ligkol van sy towerstaf daardeur terwyl hy elke nou en dan na sy horlosie loer . . .

Eenuur in die oggend . . . twee-uur in die oggend . . . al hoe hy aan die gang bly, is deur oor en oor vir homself te sê, *Die volgende boek . . . in die volgende een . . . die volgende een . . .*

Die meermin in die skildery in die prefekte se badkamer lag. Harry dobber soos 'n kurkprop in die skuimende waters langs haar rots rond terwyl sy die Vuurslag bo sy kop hou.

"Kom haal dit!" giggel sy nydig. "Komaan, spring!"

"Ek kan nie," hyg Harry terwyl hy na die Vuurslag gryp en sukkel om nie te sink nie. "Gee dit vir my!"

Sy steek hom egter pynlik seer met die besem se punt en lag hom uit.

"Dis seer – los my – eina –"

"Harry Potter moet wakker word, meneer!"

"Moet my nie steek nie –"

"Dobbi moet vir Harry Potter steek, meneer, hy moet wakker word!"

Harry se oë gaan oop. Hy is nog steeds in die biblioteek; die onsigbaarheidsmantel het in sy slaap van sy kop afgeglip en die kant van sy gesig

sit vas aan die blaai van *Waar Daar 'n Towerstaf is, is Daar 'n Weg*. Harry kom orent, stoot sy bril reg en knipper sy oë in die helder daglig.

“Harry Potter moet opskud!” piep Dobbi. “Die tweede taak gaan oor tien minute begin en Harry Potter –”

“Tien minute?” kwaak Harry. “Tien – *tien minute?*”

Hy kyk op sy horlosie. Dobbi is reg. Dit is twintig oor nege. Dis of 'n groot dooie gewig deur Harry se borskas tot in sy maag val.

“Opskud, Harry Potter!” piep Dobbi en pluk aan Harry se mou. “Jy moet by die ander kampioene onder langs die meer wees, meneer!”

“Dis te laat, Dobbi,” sê Harry moedeloos. “Ek sal daardie taak nie kan doen nie, ek weet nie hoe –”

“Harry Potter *gaan* die taak doen,” piep die elf. “Dobbi weet dat Harry nie die regte boek gekry het nie, dis hoekom Dobbi dit vir hom gedoen het!”

“Wat?” sê Harry. “Jy weet tog nie wat die tweede taak is nie –”

“Dobbi weet, meneer! Harry Potter moet in die meer gaan en sy Wheezie soek –”

“My wát soek?”

“– sy Wheezie by die meermense gaan haal!”

“Wat is 'n Wheezie?”

“Jou Wheezie, meneer, jou Wheezie wat vir Dobbi dié trui gegee het!”

Dobbi pluk aan die gekrimpte maroen trui wat hy nou oor sy kortbroek aanhet.

“Wat?” sê Harry hortend. “Hulle . . . hulle het vir *Ron?*”

“Die ding wat Harry Potter die graagste wil terughê, wat hulle nou het, meneer!” piep Dobbi. “Harry Potter het 'n uur om hom te soek –”

“– ‘jou kans is klein’,” resiteer Harry terwyl hy geskok na die elf staar, “*Te laat, dis weg, vir ewig verdwyn . . .*” Dobbi – wat moet ek doen?”

“Jy moet dit eet, meneer!” piep die elf en hy steek sy hand in sy kortbroek se sak en haal 'n klont goed uit wat soos slymerige, groengrys rotsterte lyk. “Net voor jy in die meer stap, meneer – Kieugras!”

“Wat doen dit?” sê Harry terwyl hy na die Kieugras staar.

“Dit sal maak dat Harry Potter onder die water kan asemhaal, meneer!”

“Dobbi,” sê Harry freneties, “luister – is jy seker?”

Hy kan nie help om aan die vorige keer toe Dobbi hom wou “help” te dink nie. Toe het hy uiteindelik geen beendere in sy regterarm gehad nie.

“Dobbi is heeltemal seker, meneer!” sê die elf beslis. “Dobbi hoor goeters, meneer, hy's 'n huiself, hy gaan oral in die kasteel as hy die vure aansteek en die vloere was en Dobbi het gehoor toe professor McGonagall en professor Moodie in die personeelkamer oor die volgende taak praat . . . Dobbi sal nie dat Harry Potter sy Wheezie verloor nie!”

Nou twyfel Harry nie meer nie. Hy spring op, raap die onsigbaarheids-

mantel op en prop dit in sy tas, gryp die Kieugras, druk dit in sy sak en storm by die biblioteek uit met Dobbi kort op sy hakke.

“Dobbi moet eintlik in die kombuis wees, meneer!” skree Dobbi toe hulle in die gang kom. “Hulle sal Dobbi vermis – sterkte, Harry Potter, meneer, sterkte!”

“Sien jou later, Dobbi!” skree Harry toe hy in die gang af nael en drie-drie met die trappe afspring.

Daar is nog net ’n paar ouens in die Ingangsportaal wat almal nou na ontbyt by die Groot Saal uitstap en deur die dubbele eikehoutdeure gaan om na die tweede taak te gaan kyk. Hulle staar Harry agterna toe hy verbystorm, vir Colin en Dennis Creevey in die proses uit die grond hardloop en af met die kliptrappe na die sonverligte, dog koue, terrein laat spaander.

Toe hy oor die grasperk nael, sien hy dat die stellasies wat in November om die drake se kamp was, aan die oorkantste bank staan. Die stygende rye sitplekke is tot barstens toe vol mense wat in die meer daar onder weerkaats word. Hul opgewonde gebabbel eggo vreemd oor die water. Harry hardloop in volle vaart om die ander kant van die meer, na waar die beoordelaars by ’n met goud gedrapeerde tafel aan die waterkant sit. Cedric, Fleur en Krum staan langs die beoordelaars se tafel en kyk hoe Harry aangehardloop kom.

“Ek’s . . . hier . . .” hyg Harry toe hy al glyend in die modder tot stilstand kom en Fleur se kleed per ongeluk vuil spat.

“Waar was jy?” vra ’n baasspelerige en afkeurende stem. “Die taak moet begin!”

Harry kyk om. Percy Weasley sit aan die beoordelaars se tafel – mnr. Crouch het weer eens nie opgedaag nie.

“Toe nou, Percy!” sê Ludo Bagman wat baie verlig lyk om vir Harry te sien. “Gee hom kans om asem te skep!”

Dompeldorius glimlag vir Harry, maar Karkaroff en Madame Maxine lyk nie juis in hul skik toe hulle hom sien nie . . . dit is duidelik aan die uitdrukkings op hul gesigte dat hulle gedink het dat hy nie gaan opdaag nie.

Harry buk vooroor met sy hande op sy knieë terwyl hy na asem snak; hy het ’n miltsteek in sy sy wat soos ’n mes in sy ribbes voel, maar daar is nie tyd om daarvan ontslae te raak nie; Ludo Bagman beweeg reeds tussen die kampioene rond en spasieer hulle sowat drie meter uitmekaar langs die kant. Harry staan heel aan die punt langs Krum wat ’n swembroek aanhet en sy towerstaf gereed hou.

“Gereed, Harry?” fluister Bagman toe hy vir Harry ’n paar tree van Krum af plaas. “Jy weet wat jy moet doen?”

“Ja,” blaas Harry en hy vryf sy ribbes.

Bagman gee sy skouer ’n vinnige drukkie en draai dan na die be-

oordelaars se tafel; hy wys met sy towerstaf na sy keel, net soos hy by die Wêreldbeker gedoen het, en sê “*Sonorus!*” en toe dra sy stem daverend oor die donker water na die stellasies toe.

“Wel, al ons kampioene is gereed vir die tweede taak wat sal begin sodra ek my fluitjie blaas. Hulle het presies een uur om dit wat van hulle geneem is, terug te kry. Op die telling van drie dan. Een . . . twee . . . drie!”

Die fluitjie eggo skril in die koue, stil lug; toejuiging en krete bars op die stellasies los; sonder om te kyk wat die ander kampioene doen, trek Harry sy skoene en sokkies uit, haal die hand vol Kieugras uit sy sak, prop dit in sy mond en stap die meer in.

Die meer is so koud dat hy voel hoe die vel op sy bene brand asof dit vuur en nie yskoue water is nie. Sy deurweekte kleed trek hom af hoe verder hy stap; nou is die water oor sy knieë en sy voete voel dood en gly op die slik en die gladde, plat klippe. Hy kou die Kieugras so goed en vinnig moontlik; dit voel onsmaaklik slymerig en rubberagtig, net soos seekatarms. Toe hy tot aan sy middel in die vriesende water is, gaan hy staan, sluk en wag dat iets moet gebeur.

Hy hoor hoe die mense lag en weet dat dit simpel moet lyk om die meer so in te stap sonder enige teken van towermagte. Dié deel van hom wat nog steeds droog is, is die ene hoendervleis; die res is half onder die ysige water. ’n Wrede windjie lig sy hare sodat hy vreeslik bibber en beef. Hy vermy dit om na die stellasies te kyk; die gelag word al harder en daar is ’n gejl en ’n gejou van die Slibberins . . .

Toe, skielik, voel dit vir Harry asof ’n onsigbare kussing oor sy mond en neus geklem word. Hy probeer sy longe vol trek, maar dit laat sy kop draai; sy longe is leeg en hy voel ’n skielike skerp pyn aan weerskante van sy nek –

Harry klap sy hande om sy keel en voel, net onder sy ore, twee groot gleuwe wat in die koue lug flap . . . hy *het kieuë*. Sonder om te dink, doen hy die enigste ding wat sin maak – hy slinger homself vooroor in die water.

Die eerste mond vol ysige meerwater gee hom weer lewe. Sy kop voel nie meer so duiselig nie; hy neem nog ’n yslike mond vol water en voel hoe dit oor sy kieuë vloei en suurstof na sy brein stuur. Hy strek sy hande voor hom en staar dan daarna. Hulle lyk groen en spokerig onder die water en hulle het webbe gekry. Hy kronkel om en kyk na sy kaal voete – hulle het langer geword en sy tone is ook geweb; dit lyk of daar pad-davoete uit sy bene groei.

Die water voel ook nie meer so ysig koud nie . . . intendeel, hy voel aangenaam koel en baie lig . . . Harry begin dadelik swem, verbaas oor hoe ver en vinnig sy vinagtige voete hom deur die water stuur. Hy merk ook hoe goed hy kan sien; hy hoef sy oë nie meer te knipper nie. Spoedig

het hy so ver oor die meer geswem dat die bodem onsigbaar is. Hy tol om en duik die dieptes in.

'n Drukkende stilte heers in sy ore toe hy oor 'n vreemde, donker, newelrige landskap swem. Hy kan niks verder as so tien tree voor hom sien nie sodat nuwe tonele die hele tyd uit die donkerte voor hom oopvou hoe verder hy deur die water gaan. Hy sien woude van rimpelende, gekoekte swart wiere en oop moddervlaktes besaai met klippe wat dofweg glim. Hy swem al dieper en dieper na die middel van die meer; sy oë is oopge-sper en staar deur die geheimsinnige grys waters om hom na die skadu-wees onder waar die water ondeursigtig word.

Klein vissies flikker soos silwer pyltjies verby hom. 'n Paar keer ver-beel hy hom dat hy iets groters voor hom sien beweeg, maar sodra hy na-der kom, ontdek hy niks meer as 'n groot swart stomp of 'n digte warboel wiere nie. Daar is nie 'n teken van die ander kampioene, meermense of Ron nie – genadiglik ook nie van die reuse-inkvis nie.

Liggroen wiere strek so ver as wat hy kan sien voor hom uit. Dis om-trent twee voet diep, soos 'n weiveld van oorgroeide gras. Sonder om sy oë te knip, staar Harry voor hom uit terwyl hy sukkel om in die dowwe lig uit te maak wat om hom aangaan . . . toe, plotseling, gryp iets hom aan die enkel.

Toe Harry omswaai, sien hy 'n Grindeloog, 'n klein gehoringde water-duiweltjie, wat uit die wiere loer. Sy lang vingers is styf om Harry se been geslaan en sy gepunte slagande is onthloot. Harry steek sy gewebde hand vinnig in sy kleed op soek na sy towerstaf – toe hy dit uiteindelik in die hande kry, het nog twee Grindeloë uit die wiere opgerys en hom aan die kleed gegryp. Nou probeer hulle hom dieper onder die water insleep.

“Relashio!” skree Harry, behalwe dat geen geluid uitkom nie . . . 'n groot borrel glip uit sy mond en pleks dat sy towerstaf vonke na die Grin-deloë stuur, peper dit hulle met iets wat 'n straal kokende water moet wees, want daar waar dit hulle tref, verskyn lelike rooi vlekke op hul groen velle. Harry pluk sy enkel uit die Grindeloog se greep en swem so al wat hy kan terwyl hy elke nou en dan nog 'n paar strale kookwater oor sy skouer stuur. 'n Slag of wat voel hy hoe een van die Grindeloë opnuut na sy enkel gryp. Hy gee 'n harde skop en voel uiteindelik hoe sy voet 'n gehoringde kop tref en toe hy terugkyk, sien hy hoe die bedwelmd Grindeloog met skeel oë wegdryf terwyl sy trawante vir Harry vuig wys en daarna tussen die wiere wegsak.

Nou verslap Harry die pas so ietwat. Hy steek sy towerstaf terug in sy kleed en kyk om hom rond terwyl hy fyn luister. Hy sirkel in die water en die stilte druk swaarder as ooit teen sy oordromme. Hy weet hy moet nou selfs nog dieper in die meer wees, maar niks roer nie, net die rimpe-lende wiere.

“Kom jy reg?”

Vir 'n oomblik dink Harry dat hy 'n hartaanval gaan kry. Hy tol om en sien deur 'n waas dat dit Katryn Kermkous is wat voor hom dryf en deur haar dik pêrelagtige brilglase na hom staan.

“Katryn!” probeer Harry skree – maar daar kom weer eens niks uit sy mond nie, behalwe 'n baie groot borrel. Katryn Kermkous giggel sowaar.

“Jy moet daar oorkant gaan probeer!” sê sy en wys. “Ek gaan nie saam met jou kom nie . . . ek hou nie eintlik van hulle nie, hulle jaag my altyd weg as ek te naby kom . . .”

Harry lig sy duim om dankie te sê en swem verder. Hy sorg dat hy hoog oor die wiere swem ingeval enige Grindeloë daarin wegkruip.

Vir ten minste nog twintig minute swem hy. Hy beweeg nou oor groot swart modderige areas wat troebel word as hy die water versteur. Toe, uiteindelik, hoor hy 'n greep uit die spookagtige meerlied.

*“'n Uur het jy om rond te kyk,
Om dit wat ons versteek, te kry . . .”*

Harry swem vinniger en spoedig sien hy hoe 'n groot rots in die modderige water voor hom sigbaar word. Daar is meermense op geskilder; hulle dra spiese en jaag iets wat soos die reuse-inkvis lyk. Harry swem verby die rots en volg die meerlied se klank.

*“. . . jou tyd raak min; maak gou, jou sot,
Voor wat jy soek hier gaan verrot . . .”*

'n Klomp ruwe kliphuise gevlek met alge doem skielik uit die duisternis om hom op. Hier en daar voor die donker vensters sien Harry gesigte . . . gesigte wat glad nie soos die prent van die meermin in die prefekte se badkamer lyk nie . . .

Die meermense het gryserige velle en lang, ongetemde donkergroen hare. Hul oë is geel en so ook hul gebreekte tande en hulle dra dik stringe spoelklippies om hul nekke. Hulle gryns vir Harry toe hy verbyswem; een of twee kom uit hul grotte om hom beter te kan sien. Hul kragtige vissterte slaan die water en hulle hou spiese in hul hande vas.

Harry swem voort terwyl hy oral om hom rondkyk. Die wonings word al hoe meer; daar is tuine vol wiere om sommige van hulle en hy sien selfs 'n mak Grindeloog wat aan 'n paal voor 'n huis vasgemaak is. Meermense kom nou van alle kante nader, kyk nuuskierig na hom en wys na sy kieuë en sy gewebde hande terwyl hulle agter hul hande met mekaar praat. Harry gaan haastig om 'n hoek en sien dan iets wat baie vreemd is.

'n Groot groep meermense dryf voor die huise wat om die meerweer-

gawe van 'n dorpsplein staan. In die middel is 'n koor van singende meermense wat die kampioene na hulle toe lok en agter hulle staan 'n kruisbeeld; 'n reusagtige meerpersoon wat uit 'n rots gekap is. Vier meense is styf aan die klipmeermens se stert vasgemaak.

Ron is tussen Hermien en Cho Chang vasgebind. Daar is ook 'n meisie wat niks ouer as agt kan wees nie. Dis haar wolk silwerblonde hare wat Harry laat dink dat sy Fleur Delacour se suster moet wees. Dit lyk asof al vier in 'n diep slaap verval het. Hul koppe rol op hul skouers rond en dun straaltjies borrels vloei by hul monde uit.

Harry gaan haastig na die gyselaars; hy verwag half dat die meermense hul spiese gaan laat sak en hom gaan bestorm, maar hulle doen niks. Die wiertoue waarmee die gyselaars aan die standbeeld vasgebind is, is dik, olymerig en baie sterk. Vir 'n vlietende oomblik dink hy aan die mes wat Sirius hom vir Kersfees gegee het – toegesluit in sy trommel in die kastel 'n ver ent hiervandaan en van geen nut nie.

Hy kyk om hom rond. Verskeie van die meermense om hom dra spiese. Hy swem vinnig na 'n meerman van oor die twee meter lank. Hy het 'n lang groen baard en 'n nekband van haaitande en Harry probeer vir hom mimiek dat hy sy spies wil leen. Die meerman lag en skud sy kop.

“Ons help nie,” sê hy in 'n skor, krakerige stem.

“KomAAN!” sê Harry vererg (hoewel slegs borrels by sy mond uitkom) en hy probeer om die spies by die meerman af te vat, maar die meerman ruk dit weg, skud sy kop weer en lag.

Harry swaai om en staar om hom rond. Iets skerps . . . enigiets . . .

Die bodem van die meer is besaai met klippe. Hy duik, tel 'n klip met 'n besonder getande rand op en gaan terug na die standbeeld. Hy begin om die toue om Ron af te sny, en na 'n paar minute se harde werk kom hulle los. Ron, wat heeltemal bewusteloos is, dryf 'n entjie bo die meer se bodem en wieg effens op die gety.

Harry kyk rond. Daar is nie 'n teken van die ander kampioene nie. Waar bly hulle? Hoekom maak hulle nie gou nie? Hy draai na Hermien, lig die skurwe klip en begin om haar toue ook af te sny –

Onmiddellik gryp 'n paar sterk grys hande hom. 'n Halfdosyn meermanne sleep hom van Hermien af weg, terwyl hulle hul groen koppe laggend skud.

“Neem jou eie gyselaar,” sê een van hulle vir hom. “Los die ander . . .”

“Vergeet daarvan!” sê Harry vererg – maar net twee groot borrels kom uit.

“Jou taak is om jou eie vriend te red . . . los die ander . . .”

“Sy's ook my vriendin!” gil Harry terwyl hy na Hermien wys en 'n groot silwer borrel geluidloos oor sy lippe gly. “En ek wil ook nie hê dat een van hulle moet doodgaan nie!”

Cho se kop rus op Hermien se skouer; die skraal silwerkopmeisietjie

lyk spookagtig groen en bleek. Harry sukkel om die meermanne af te weer, maar hulle lag al harder terwyl hulle hom terughou. Harry kyk wild om hom rond. Waar bly die ander kampioene? Sal daar genoeg tyd wees om Ron boontoe te neem en dan vir Hermien en die ander te kom haal? Sal hy hulle ooit weer kry? Weer kyk hy na sy horlosie om te sien hoeveel tyd oor is – dit het gaan staan.

Net toe begin die meermense om hom opgewonde bo-oor sy kop wys. Harry kyk op en sien dat dit Cedric is wat nader swem. Daar is 'n enorme borrel om sy kop wat sy gelaatstrekke vreemd breed en uitgerek laat lyk.

“Het verdwaal!” beduie hy met sy mond. Hy lyk vreesbevange. “Fleur en Krum is op pad!”

Harry voel oneindig verlig. Hy kyk hoe Cedric 'n mes uit sy sak haal en Cho lossny. Hy trek haar boontoe uit sig uit.

Harry kyk om en wag. Waar bly Fleur en Krum? Die tyd raak min en volgens die lied sal dit na 'n uur klaarpraat met die gyselaars wees . . .

Dan begin die meermense opgewonde skree. Diegene wat Harry vashou, verslap hul greep en staar agtertoe. Toe Harry omdraai, sien hy hoe iets monsteragtigs deur die water op hulle afpyl: 'n menslike liggaam in 'n swembroek met die kop van 'n haai . . . dit is Krum. Dit lyk asof hy homself getransfigureer het – maar sleg.

Die haaimens pyl reguit op Hermien af en begin om die toue af te byt; die probleem is dat Krum se nuwe tande so geplaas is dat hy nie eintlik iets wat kleiner as 'n dolfin is, kan byt nie en Harry is bevrees dat Krum vir Hermien in twee gaan hap as hy nie versigtig is nie. Hy pyl vorentoe, slaan Krum hard op die skouer en hou die getande klip na hom toe uit. Krum gryp dit en begin om Hermien los te sny. Hy is binne sekondes klaar, gryp Hermien om die middel en swem vinnig na die oppervlak sonder om terug te kyk.

Wat nou? dink Harry wanhopig. As hy net seker kan wees dat Fleur wel op pad is . . . daar is egter nog steeds geen teken van haar nie. Hy kan niks anders doen nie . . .

Hy gryp die klip wat Krum laat val het, maar nou maak die meermense 'n kring om Ron en die dogtertjie en hulle skud hul koppe vir hom.

Harry trek sy towerstaf uit. “Gee pad!”

Slegs borrels kom by sy mond uit, maar hy kry tog die indruk dat die meermense hom verstaan, want hulle hou skielik op met lag. Hul gelerige oë is vasgenael op Harry se towerstaf en hulle lyk verskrik. Daar is weliswaar baie meer van hulle as van hom, maar aan die uitdrukkings op hul gesigte kan Harry sien dat hulle nog minder as die reuse-inkvis van towerkuns af weet.

“Ek tel drie!” skree Harry; 'n groot stroom borrels bars uit sy mond en hy hou drie vingers op om seker te maak dat hulle die boodskap verstaan. “Een . . .” (hy laat sak een vinger) – “twee . . .” (hy laat sak die tweede) –

Hulle spat uitmekaar. Harry pyl vorentoe en kap aan die toue wat die meisietjie aan die standbeeld vasbind. Uiteindelik is sy vry. Hy vat haar om die middel vas, gryp Ron se kleed aan die nek en skop van die bodem af weg.

Dit gaan stadig. Hy kan nie meer sy gewebde hande gebruik om mee te swem nie; hy skop dus verwoed met sy swempote, maar Ron en Fleur se sussie trek hom soos sakke aartappels ondertoe . . . hy lig sy oë boontoe. Hy weet goed dat hy nog baie diep moet wees; die water om hom is erg donker . . .

Die meermense styg saam met hom op. Hy sien hoe hulle gemaklik om hom draai terwyl hulle kyk hoe hy deur die water sukkel . . . gaan hulle hom die dieptes intrek wanneer sy tyd om is? Eet hulle dalk mensvleis? Harry se bene word swak van inspanning om aan te hou swem; sy skouers pyn verskriklik van die gesukkel om Ron en die meisietjie saam te sleep . . .

Hy haal nou met groot moeite asem. Weer voel hy die pyn aan weerskante van sy nek . . . hy kom agter hoe nat die water in sy mond is . . . tog is dit asof die donkerte besig is om minder te word . . . bo hom sien hy daglig . . .

Hy skop hard met sy swempote en ontdek dat hulle nou niks meer as voete is nie . . . water stroom deur sy mond tot in sy longe . . . hy voel duiselig, maar hy weet dat lig en lug net 'n paar tree bo hom is . . . hy moet daar kom . . . hy moet . . .

Harry skop so hard en so vinnig dat dit voel asof sy spiere weerspanning skree; dit voel of sy brein vol water is, hy kan nie asemhaal nie, hy moet suurstof kry, hy moet aanhou, hy kan nie stop nie –

Dan voel hy hoe sy kop deur die oppervlak van die meer breek; wonderlike koue lug brand sy nat gesig; hy trek dit in en dit voel asof hy nog nooit tevore behoorlik asemgehaal het nie. Hy trek Ron en die meisietjie hygend saam met hom boontoe. Wilde groen koppe verskyn om hom in die water, maar hulle glimlag vir hom.

Die mense op die stellasies maak 'n verskriklike kabaal; almal staan regop en skree en gil; Harry kry die indruk dat hulle dink dat Ron en die meisietjie dood is, maar hulle is verkeerd . . . sowel Ron as die meisie het hul oë oopgemaak; die meisie lyk bang en verward, maar Ron spoeg bloot 'n lang straal water uit, knipper sy oë in die helder lig, draai na Harry en sê, “Nat, nè?” Toe sien hy Fleur se sussie. “Vir wat het jy haar gebring?”

“Fleur het nie gekom nie. Ek kon haar nie net daar los nie,” hyg Harry.

“Harry, hoe kan jy so toe wees,” sê Ron, “jy’t daardie liedaffêre darem seker nie ernstig opgeneem nie, nè? Dompeldorius sal mos nie dat een van ons verdrink nie!”

“Maar die lied het gesê –”

“Net om seker te maak dat jy betyds terugkom!” sê Ron. “Ek hoop nie jy’t ’n spul tyd daar onder staan en mors en jou lyf held gehou nie?”

Harry voel onnosel sowel as vererg. Dit is alles goed en wel vir Ron; hy was vas aan die slaap, hy weet nie hoe spokerig dit onder in die meer is nie, so tussen meermense met spiese wat lyk asof hulle enige oomblik kan moord pleeg.

“Komaan,” sê Harry kortaf, “help my met haar, ek dink nie sy kan juis swem nie.”

Hulle trek Fleur se suster deur die water terug na die wal waar die beoordelaars staan en kyk terwyl twintig meermense wat aaklige, skril liedere sing hulle soos ’n erewag volg.

Harry sien dat Madame Pomfrey met Hermien, Krum, Cedric en Cho doenig is. Hulle is almal in dik komberse toegedraai. Dompeldorius en Ludo Bagman staan stralend op die wal en kyk hoe Harry en Ron nader swem, maar Percy, wat baie bleek is en om die een of ander rede heelwat jonger as gewoonlik lyk, kom hulle plassend tegemoet. Madame Maxine het haar hande vol met Fleur Delacour wat heeltemal histories is en met hand en tand baklei om terug in die water te gaan.

“Gabrielle! *Gabrielle! Lewe sy? Het sy seergekry?*”

“Sy’s oukei!” probeer Harry sê, maar hy is so pootuit dat hy skaars kan praat, wat nog te sê iets skree.

Percy gryp vir Ron en sleep hom wal toe (“Los my, Percy, ek’s oukei!”); Dompeldorius en Bagman help vir Harry orent; Fleur het Madame Maxine afgeskud en is besig om haar suster te omhels.

“Dit was die Grindeloë . . . hulle’t my aangeval . . . o, Gabrielle, ek het gedink . . . ek het gedink . . .”

“Kom hier, jy,” sê Madame Pomfrey; sy gryp vir Harry, trek hom na waar Hermien en die ander is en wikkels hom so deeglik in ’n kombers toe dat dit vir hom voel asof hy in ’n dwangbuis toegedraai is. Toe dwing sy ’n stywe dosis van ’n baie warm towerdrankie in sy keel af sodat die stoom by sy ore uitwarrel.

“Mooi sò, Harry!” gil Hermien, “jy het dit reggekry, jy’t op jou eie uitgevind wat om te doen!”

“Wel –” sê Harry. Hy sou haar van Dobbi vertel het, maar sien dan dat Karkaroff na hom staan en kyk. Hy is die enigste beoordelaar wat nie die tafel verlaat het nie; die enigste beoordelaar wat nie in sy skik lyk dat Harry, Ron en Fleur se suster veilig terug is nie. “Ja, dis reg,” sê Harry en hy praat effens harder sodat Karkaroff hom kan hoor.

“Jy het ’n vwaterkevier in jou hare, Hermien,” sê Krum.

Harry kry die indruk dat Krum die aandag na homself wil trek; dalk om haar daaraan te herinner dat hy haar so pas uit die meer gered het, maar Hermien vee die kewe ongeduldig uit haar hare en sê, “Julle is baie laat, Harry . . . Het jy lank na ons gesoek?”

“Nee . . . ek het julle redelik maklik gekry . . .”

Harry voel al hoe meer onnosel. Noudat hy uit die water is, is dit baie duidelik dat Dompeldorius se veiligheidsmaatreëls nie sou toelaat dat 'n gyselaar sal doodgaan net omdat die kampioen nie opgedaag het nie. Hoekom het hy nie net vir Ron gegryp en teruggegaan nie? Hy sou eerste terug gewees het . . . Cedric en Krum het nie tyd gemors deur hulle oor enigiemand anders te bekommer nie; hulle het nie die meerlied ernstig opgeneem nie . . .

Dompeldorius sit gehurk aan die waterkant, diep in gesprek met wat na die hoofmeermens lyk, 'n vrou wat besonder wild en wreedaardig voorkom. Hy maak dieselfde skril geluide wat die meermense maak wanneer hulle bo die water is; dit is duidelik dat Dompeldorius Meermins kan praat. Uiteindelik kom hy orent, draai na sy medebeoordelaars en sê, “Wat van 'n konferensie voor ons die punte toeken?”

Die beoordelaars hurk bymekaar. Madame Pomfrey het vir Ron uit Percy se kloue bevry en lei hom nou na Harry en die ander waar sy vir hom 'n kombars en 'n Opkikkerdrankie gee. Dan gaan sy terug om Fleur en haar suster te gaan haal. Fleur het 'n hele klomp skrape op haar gesig en arms en haar kleed is geskeur, maar dit lyk nie asof sy omgee nie en sy wil ook nie dat Madame Pomfrey dit skoonmaak nie.

“Sorg vir Gabrielle,” sê sy vir haar en toe draai sy na Harry. “Jy het haar gered,” sê sy uitasem. “En sy was nie eens jou gyselaar nie.”

“H'm,” sê Harry, wat nou van harte wens dat hy al drie meisies vasgebind aan die standbeeld gelos het.

Fleur buig oor, soen Harry twee maal op elke wang (hy voel hoe sy gesig brand en sou nie verbaas wees as die stoom opnuut by sy ore uitkom nie), toe sê sy vir Ron, “En jy ook – jy't ook gehelp –”

“Ja,” sê Ron wat uiters hoopvol lyk, “ja, so 'n bietjie –”

Fleur pyl ook op hom af en gee hom 'n soen. Hermien lyk briesend kwaad, maar op daardie oomblik weerklink Ludo Bagman se stem daverend langs hulle sodat almal wip van die skrik en die skare op die stellacies doodstil word.

“Dames en here, ons het tot 'n beslissing gekom. Meerhoofmin Murcus het ons vertel presies wat op die bodem van die meer gebeur het en ons het besluit om die punte uit vyftig vir elke kampioen soos volg toe te ken . . .

“Mej. Fleur Delacour het wel uitstekende gebruik van die Borrelkoptowerspreuk gemaak, maar is deur Grindeloë aangeval en het nie daarin geslaag om haar gyselaar te bevry nie. Vir haar gee ons vyf-en-twintig punte.”

Toejuiging van die stellacies af.

“Ek verdien nul,” sê Fleur hees terwyl sy haar manjifieke kop skud.

“Mnr. Cedric Diggory het ook die Borrelkoptowerspreuk gebruik en

was eerste terug met sy gyselaar, hoewel hy een minuut laat was." Daar is 'n geweldige applous vanaf die Hoesenproesers in die skare; Harry sien hoe Cho gloeiend na Cedric kyk. "Ons gee dus vir hom sewe-en-veertig punte."

Harry se hart sink. As Cedric laat was, was hy baie beslis ook.

"Mnr. Viktor Krum het 'n onvolledige Transfigurasie gedoen wat nogtans doetreffend was en hy was tweede met sy gyselaar. Ons gee vir hom veertig punte."

Karkaroff klap besonder hard hande en lyk uiters meerderwaardig.

"Mnr. Harry Potter het Kieugras baie effektief benut," gaan Bagman voort. "Hy is laaste terug en hopeloos laat, maar die Meerhoofmin het ons ingelig dat mnr. Potter eerste by die gyselaars was en dat die verdrag van sy terugkoms die gevolg is van sy vasberadenheid om te sorg dat al die gyselaars veilig is, nie net hyself nie."

Ron en Hermien kyk albei half ergerlik, half bejammerend na Harry.

"Die meeste beoordelaars" – en hier gee Bagman vir Karkaroff 'n besonder nydige kyk – "voel dat dit morele kwaliteit toon en dus volpunte verdien. Desnieteenstaande kry mnr. Potter . . . vyf-en-veertig punte."

Harry se maag spring – hy loop nou saam met Cedric voor. Ron en Hermien wat onkant betrap is, gaap Harry aan, dan lag en klap hulle net so hard soos die res van die mense hande.

"Dit wys jou net, Harry!" skree Ron bo-oor die geraas. "Jy's toe na alles nie toe nie – jy't morele kwaliteit!"

Ook Fleur klap baie hard hande, maar Krum lyk nie juis in sy skik nie. Hy probeer om Hermien weer by 'n gesprek te betrek, maar sy is te besig om vir Harry toe te juig om na hom te luister.

"Die derde en finale taak sal teen skemer op die vier-en-twintigste Junie plaasvind," gaan Bagman voort. "Die kampioene sal presies 'n maand voor die tyd verneem wat op hulle wag. Dankie dat julle die kampioene so mooi ondersteun het."

Dit is verby, dink Harry verdwaas toe Madame Pomfrey die kampioene en die gyselaars terug kasteel toe jaag om droë klere te gaan aantrek . . . dit is oor, hy het dit reggekry . . . hy hoef hom nie weer voor die vier-en-twintigste Junie oor iets te bekommer nie . . .

Die volgende keer dat hy Hogsmeade toe gaan, besluit hy toe hy met die kliptrappe voor die kasteel boontoe klim, gaan hy vir Dobbi vir elke dag van die jaar 'n paar sokkies koop.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



PADFOOT RETURNS

One of the best things about the aftermath of the second task was that everybody was very keen to hear details of what had happened down in the lake, which meant that Ron was getting to share Harry's limelight for once. Harry noticed that Ron's version of events changed subtly with every retelling. At first, he gave what seemed to be the truth; it tallied with Hermione's story, anyway — Dumbledore had put all the hostages into a bewitched sleep in Professor McGonagall's office, first assuring them that they would be quite safe, and would awake when they were back above the water. One week later, however, Ron was telling a thrilling tale of kidnap in which he struggled single-handedly against fifty heavily armed

merpeople who had to beat him into submission before tying him up.

“But I had my wand hidden up my sleeve,” he assured Padma Patil, who seemed to be a lot keener on Ron now that he was getting so much attention and was making a point of talking to him every time they passed in the corridors. “I could’ve taken those mer-idiot any time I wanted.”

“What were you going to do, snore at them?” said Hermione waspishly. People had been teasing her so much about being the thing that Viktor Krum would most miss that she was in a rather tetchy mood.

Ron’s ears went red, and thereafter, he reverted to the bewitched sleep version of events.

As they entered March the weather became drier, but cruel winds skinned their hands and faces every time they went out onto the grounds. There were delays in the post because the owls kept being blown off course. The brown owl that Harry had sent to Sirius with the dates of the Hogsmeade weekend turned up at breakfast on Friday morning with half its feathers sticking up the wrong way; Harry had no sooner torn off Sirius’s reply than it took flight, clearly afraid it was going to be sent outside again.

Sirius’s letter was almost as short as the previous one.

Be at stile at end of road out of Hogsmeade (past Dervish and Banges) at two o’clock on Saturday afternoon. Bring as much food as you can.

“He hasn’t come back to Hogsmeade?” said Ron incredulously.

“It looks like it, doesn’t it?” said Hermione.

“I can’t believe him,” said Harry tensely, “if he’s caught . . .”

“Made it so far, though, hasn’t he?” said Ron. “And it’s not like the place is swarming with dementors anymore.”

Harry folded up the letter, thinking. If he was honest with himself, he really wanted to see Sirius again. He therefore approached the final lesson of the afternoon — double Potions — feeling considerably more cheerful than he usually did when descending the steps to the dungeons.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were standing in a huddle outside the classroom door with Pansy Parkinson’s gang of Slytherin girls. All of them were looking at something Harry couldn’t see and sniggering heartily. Pansy’s pug-like face peered excitedly around Goyle’s broad back as Harry, Ron, and Hermione approached.

“There they are, there they are!” she giggled, and the knot of Slytherins broke apart. Harry saw that Pansy had a magazine in her hands — *Witch Weekly*. The moving picture on the front showed a curly-haired witch who was smiling toothily and pointing at a large sponge cake with her wand.

“You might find something to interest you in there, Granger!” Pansy said loudly, and she threw the magazine at Hermione, who caught it, looking startled. At that moment, the dungeon door opened, and Snape beckoned them all inside.

Hermione, Harry, and Ron headed for a table at the back of the dungeon as usual. Once Snape had turned his back on them to write up the ingredients of today’s potion on the blackboard, Hermione hastily rifled through the magazine under the desk. At last, in the center pages, Hermione found what they were looking for. Harry and

Ron leaned in closer. A color photograph of Harry headed a short piece entitled:

Harry Potter's Secret Heartache

A boy like no other, perhaps — yet a boy suffering all the usual pangs of adolescence, *writes Rita Skeeter*. Deprived of love since the tragic demise of his parents, fourteen-year-old Harry Potter thought he had found solace in his steady girlfriend at Hogwarts, Muggle-born Hermione Granger. Little did he know that he would shortly be suffering yet another emotional blow in a life already littered with personal loss.

Miss Granger, a plain but ambitious girl, seems to have a taste for famous wizards that Harry alone cannot satisfy. Since the arrival at Hogwarts of Viktor Krum, Bulgarian Seeker and hero of the last World Quidditch Cup, Miss Granger has been toying with both boys' affections. Krum, who is openly smitten with the devious Miss Granger, has already invited her to visit him in Bulgaria over the summer holidays, and insists that he has "never felt this way about any other girl."

However, it might not be Miss Granger's doubtful natural charms that have captured these unfortunate boys' interest.

"She's really ugly," says Pansy Parkinson, a pretty and vivacious fourth-year student, "but she'd be well up to making a Love Potion, she's quite brainy. I think that's how

she's doing it."

Love Potions are, of course, banned at Hogwarts, and no doubt Albus Dumbledore will want to investigate these claims. In the meantime, Harry Potter's well-wishers must hope that, next time, he bestows his heart on a worthier candidate.

"I told you!" Ron hissed at Hermione as she stared down at the article. "I *told* you not to annoy Rita Skeeter! She's made you out to be some sort of — of scarlet woman!"

Hermione stopped looking astonished and snorted with laughter. "*Scarlet woman?*" she repeated, shaking with suppressed giggles as she looked around at Ron.

"It's what my mum calls them," Ron muttered, his ears going red.

"If that's the best Rita can do, she's losing her touch," said Hermione, still giggling, as she threw *Witch Weekly* onto the empty chair beside her. "What a pile of old rubbish."

She looked over at the Slytherins, who were all watching her and Harry closely across the room to see if they had been upset by the article. Hermione gave them a sarcastic smile and a wave, and she, Harry, and Ron started unpacking the ingredients they would need for their Wit-Sharpening Potion.

"There's something funny, though," said Hermione ten minutes later, holding her pestle suspended over a bowl of scarab beetles. "How could Rita Skeeter have known . . . ?"

"Known what?" said Ron quickly. "You *haven't* been mixing up Love Potions, have you?"

“Don’t be stupid,” Hermione snapped, starting to pound up her beetles again. “No, it’s just . . . how did she know Viktor asked me to visit him over the summer?”

Hermione blushed scarlet as she said this and determinedly avoided Ron’s eyes.

“What?” said Ron, dropping his pestle with a loud clunk.

“He asked me right after he’d pulled me out of the lake,” Hermione muttered. “After he’d got rid of his shark’s head. Madam Pomfrey gave us both blankets and then he sort of pulled me away from the judges so they wouldn’t hear, and he said, if I wasn’t doing anything over the summer, would I like to —”

“And what did you say?” said Ron, who had picked up his pestle and was grinding it on the desk, a good six inches from his bowl, because he was looking at Hermione.

“And he *did* say he’d never felt the same way about anyone else,” Hermione went on, going so red now that Harry could almost feel the heat coming from her, “but how could Rita Skeeter have heard him? She wasn’t there . . . or was she? Maybe she *has* got an Invisibility Cloak; maybe she sneaked onto the grounds to watch the second task. . . .”

“And what did you say?” Ron repeated, pounding his pestle down so hard that it dented the desk.

“Well, I was too busy seeing whether you and Harry were okay to —”

“Fascinating though your social life undoubtedly is, Miss Granger,” said an icy voice right behind them, and all three of them jumped, “I must ask you not to discuss it in my class. Ten points from

Gryffindor.”

Snape had glided over to their desk while they were talking. The whole class was now looking around at them; Malfoy took the opportunity to flash *POTTER STINKS* across the dungeon at Harry.

“Ah . . . reading magazines under the table as well?” Snape added, snatching up the copy of *Witch Weekly*. “A further ten points from Gryffindor . . . oh but of course . . .” Snape’s black eyes glittered as they fell on Rita Skeeter’s article. “Potter has to keep up with his press cuttings. . . .”

The dungeon rang with the Slytherins’ laughter, and an unpleasant smile curled Snape’s thin mouth. To Harry’s fury, he began to read the article aloud.

“‘*Harry Potter’s Secret Heartache*’ . . . dear, dear, Potter, what’s ailing you now? ‘*A boy like no other, perhaps . . .*’”

Harry could feel his face burning. Snape was pausing at the end of every sentence to allow the Slytherins a hearty laugh. The article sounded ten times worse when read by Snape. Even Hermione was blushing scarlet now.

“‘ . . . *Harry Potter’s well-wishers must hope that, next time, he bestows his heart upon a worthier candidate.*’ How very touching,” sneered Snape, rolling up the magazine to continued gales of laughter from the Slytherins. “Well, I think I had better separate the three of you, so you can keep your minds on your potions rather than on your tangled love lives. Weasley, you stay here. Miss Granger, over there, beside Miss Parkinson. Potter — that table in front of my desk. Move. Now.”

Furious, Harry threw his ingredients and his bag into his cauldron

and dragged it up to the front of the dungeon to the empty table. Snape followed, sat down at his desk and watched Harry unload his cauldron. Determined not to look at Snape, Harry resumed the mashing of his scarab beetles, imagining each one to have Snape's face.

"All this press attention seems to have inflated your already overlarge head, Potter," said Snape quietly, once the rest of the class had settled down again.

Harry didn't answer. He knew Snape was trying to provoke him; he had done this before. No doubt he was hoping for an excuse to take a round fifty points from Gryffindor before the end of the class.

"You might be laboring under the delusion that the entire Wizarding world is impressed with you," Snape went on, so quietly that no one else could hear him (Harry continued to pound his scarab beetles, even though he had already reduced them to a very fine powder), "but I don't care how many times your picture appears in the papers. To me, Potter, you are nothing but a nasty little boy who considers rules to be beneath him."

Harry tipped the powdered beetles into his cauldron and started cutting up his ginger roots. His hands were shaking slightly out of anger, but he kept his eyes down, as though he couldn't hear what Snape was saying to him.

"So I give you fair warning, Potter," Snape continued in a softer and more dangerous voice, "pint-sized celebrity or not — if I catch you breaking into my office one more time —"

"I haven't been anywhere near your office!" said Harry angrily, forgetting his feigned deafness.

“Don’t lie to me,” Snape hissed, his fathomless black eyes boring into Harry’s. “Boomslang skin. Gillyweed. Both come from my private stores, and I know who stole them.”

Harry stared back at Snape, determined not to blink or to look guilty. In truth, he hadn’t stolen either of these things from Snape. Hermione had taken the boomslang skin back in their second year — they had needed it for the Polyjuice Potion — and while Snape had suspected Harry at the time, he had never been able to prove it. Dobby, of course, had stolen the gillyweed.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Harry lied coldly.

“You were out of bed on the night my office was broken into!” Snape hissed. “I know it, Potter! Now, Mad-Eye Moody might have joined your fan club, but I will not tolerate your behavior! One more nighttime stroll into my office, Potter, and you will pay!”

“Right,” said Harry coolly, turning back to his ginger roots. “I’ll bear that in mind if I ever get the urge to go in there.”

Snape’s eyes flashed. He plunged a hand into the inside of his black robes. For one wild moment, Harry thought Snape was about to pull out his wand and curse him — then he saw that Snape had drawn out a small crystal bottle of a completely clear potion. Harry stared at it.

“Do you know what this is, Potter?” Snape said, his eyes glittering dangerously again.

“No,” said Harry, with complete honesty this time.

“It is Veritaserum — a Truth Potion so powerful that three drops would have you spilling your innermost secrets for this entire class to hear,” said Snape viciously. “Now, the use of this potion is

controlled by very strict Ministry guidelines. But unless you watch your step, you might just find that my hand *slips*” — he shook the crystal bottle slightly — “right over your evening pumpkin juice. And then, Potter . . . then we’ll find out whether you’ve been in my office or not.”

Harry said nothing. He turned back to his ginger roots once more, picked up his knife, and started slicing them again. He didn’t like the sound of that Truth Potion at all, nor would he put it past Snape to slip him some. He repressed a shudder at the thought of what might come spilling out of his mouth if Snape did it . . . quite apart from landing a whole lot of people in trouble — Hermione and Dobby for a start — there were all the other things he was concealing . . . like the fact that he was in contact with Sirius . . . and — his insides squirmed at the thought — how he felt about Cho. . . . He tipped his ginger roots into the cauldron too, and wondered whether he ought to take a leaf out of Moody’s book and start drinking only from a private hip flask.

There was a knock on the dungeon door.

“Enter,” said Snape in his usual voice.

The class looked around as the door opened. Professor Karkaroff came in. Everyone watched him as he walked up toward Snape’s desk. He was twisting his finger around his goatee and looking agitated.

“We need to talk,” said Karkaroff abruptly when he had reached Snape. He seemed so determined that nobody should hear what he was saying that he was barely opening his lips; it was as though he were a rather poor ventriloquist. Harry kept his eyes on his ginger

roots, listening hard.

“I’ll talk to you after my lesson, Karkaroff,” Snape muttered, but Karkaroff interrupted him.

“I want to talk now, while you can’t slip off, Severus. You’ve been avoiding me.”

“After the lesson,” Snape snapped.

Under the pretext of holding up a measuring cup to see if he’d poured out enough armadillo bile, Harry sneaked a sidelong glance at the pair of them. Karkaroff looked extremely worried, and Snape looked angry.

Karkaroff hovered behind Snape’s desk for the rest of the double period. He seemed intent on preventing Snape from slipping away at the end of class. Keen to hear what Karkaroff wanted to say, Harry deliberately knocked over his bottle of armadillo bile with two minutes to go to the bell, which gave him an excuse to duck down behind his cauldron and mop up while the rest of the class moved noisily toward the door.

“What’s so urgent?” he heard Snape hiss at Karkaroff.

“*This*,” said Karkaroff, and Harry, peering around the edge of his cauldron, saw Karkaroff pull up the left-hand sleeve of his robe and show Snape something on his inner forearm.

“Well?” said Karkaroff, still making every effort not to move his lips. “Do you see? It’s never been this clear, never since —”

“Put it away!” snarled Snape, his black eyes sweeping the classroom.

“But you must have noticed —” Karkaroff began in an agitated voice.

“We can talk later, Karkaroff!” spat Snape. “Potter! What are you doing?”

“Clearing up my armadillo bile, Professor,” said Harry innocently, straightening up and showing Snape the sodden rag he was holding.

Karkaroff turned on his heel and strode out of the dungeon. He looked both worried and angry. Not wanting to remain alone with an exceptionally angry Snape, Harry threw his books and ingredients back into his bag and left at top speed to tell Ron and Hermione what he had just witnessed.

They left the castle at noon the next day to find a weak silver sun shining down upon the grounds. The weather was milder than it had been all year, and by the time they arrived in Hogsmeade, all three of them had taken off their cloaks and thrown them over their shoulders. The food Sirius had told them to bring was in Harry’s bag; they had sneaked a dozen chicken legs, a loaf of bread, and a flask of pumpkin juice from the lunch table.

They went into Gladrags Wizardwear to buy a present for Dobby, where they had fun selecting the most lurid socks they could find, including a pair patterned with flashing gold and silver stars, and another that screamed loudly when they became too smelly. Then, at half past one, they made their way up the High Street, past Dervish and Banges, and out toward the edge of the village.

Harry had never been in this direction before. The winding lane was leading them out into the wild countryside around Hogsmeade. The cottages were fewer here, and their gardens larger; they were walking toward the foot of the mountain in whose shadow

Hogsmeade lay. Then they turned a corner and saw a stile at the end of the lane. Waiting for them, its front paws on the topmost bar, was a very large, shaggy black dog, which was carrying some newspapers in its mouth and looking very familiar. . . .

“Hello, Sirius,” said Harry when they had reached him.

The black dog sniffed Harry’s bag eagerly, wagged its tail once, then turned and began to trot away from them across the scrubby patch of ground that rose to meet the rocky foot of the mountain. Harry, Ron, and Hermione climbed over the stile and followed.

Sirius led them to the very foot of the mountain, where the ground was covered with boulders and rocks. It was easy for him, with his four paws, but Harry, Ron, and Hermione were soon out of breath. They followed Sirius higher, up onto the mountain itself. For nearly half an hour they climbed a steep, winding, and stony path, following Sirius’s wagging tail, sweating in the sun, the shoulder straps of Harry’s bag cutting into his shoulders.

Then, at last, Sirius slipped out of sight, and when they reached the place where he had vanished, they saw a narrow fissure in the rock. They squeezed into it and found themselves in a cool, dimly lit cave. Tethered at the end of it, one end of his rope around a large rock, was Buckbeak the hippogriff. Half gray horse, half giant eagle, Buckbeak’s fierce orange eye flashed at the sight of them. All three of them bowed low to him, and after regarding them imperiously for a moment, Buckbeak bent his scaly front knees and allowed Hermione to rush forward and stroke his feathery neck. Harry, however, was looking at the black dog, which had just turned into his godfather.

Sirius was wearing ragged gray robes; the same ones he had been

wearing when he had left Azkaban. His black hair was longer than it had been when he had appeared in the fire, and it was untidy and matted once more. He looked very thin.

“Chicken!” he said hoarsely after removing the old *Daily Prophets* from his mouth and throwing them down onto the cave floor.

Harry pulled open his bag and handed over the bundle of chicken legs and bread.

“Thanks,” said Sirius, opening it, grabbing a drumstick, sitting down on the cave floor, and tearing off a large chunk with his teeth. “I’ve been living off rats mostly. Can’t steal too much food from Hogsmeade; I’d draw attention to myself.”

He grinned up at Harry, but Harry returned the grin only reluctantly.

“What’re you doing here, Sirius?” he said.

“Fulfilling my duty as godfather,” said Sirius, gnawing on the chicken bone in a very doglike way. “Don’t worry about it, I’m pretending to be a lovable stray.”

He was still grinning, but seeing the anxiety in Harry’s face, said more seriously, “I want to be on the spot. Your last letter . . . well, let’s just say things are getting fishier. I’ve been stealing the paper every time someone throws one out, and by the looks of things, I’m not the only one who’s getting worried.”

He nodded at the yellowing *Daily Prophets* on the cave floor, and Ron picked them up and unfolded them. Harry, however, continued to stare at Sirius.

“What if they catch you? What if you’re seen?”

“You three and Dumbledore are the only ones around here who

know I'm an Animagus," said Sirius, shrugging, and continuing to devour the chicken leg.

Ron nudged Harry and passed him the *Daily Prophets*. There were two: The first bore the headline *Mystery Illness of Bartemius Crouch*, the second, *Ministry Witch Still Missing — Minister of Magic Now Personally Involved*.

Harry scanned the story about Crouch. Phrases jumped out at him: *hasn't been seen in public since November . . . house appears deserted . . . St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries decline comment . . . Ministry refuses to confirm rumors of critical illness. . . .*

"They're making it sound like he's dying," said Harry slowly. "But he can't be that ill if he managed to get up here. . . ."

"My brother's Crouch's personal assistant," Ron informed Sirius. "He says Crouch is suffering from overwork."

"Mind you, he *did* look ill, last time I saw him up close," said Harry slowly, still reading the story. "The night my name came out of the goblet. . . ."

"Getting his comeuppance for sacking Winky, isn't he?" said Hermione, an edge to her voice. She was stroking Buckbeak, who was crunching up Sirius's chicken bones. "I bet he wishes he hadn't done it now — bet he feels the difference now she's not there to look after him."

"Hermione's obsessed with house-elves," Ron muttered to Sirius, casting Hermione a dark look. Sirius, however, looked interested.

"Crouch sacked his house-elf?"

"Yeah, at the Quidditch World Cup," said Harry, and he launched

into the story of the Dark Mark's appearance, and Winky being found with Harry's wand clutched in her hand, and Mr. Crouch's fury. When Harry had finished, Sirius was on his feet again and had started pacing up and down the cave.

"Let me get this straight," he said after a while, brandishing a fresh chicken leg. "You first saw the elf in the Top Box. She was saving Crouch a seat, right?"

"Right," said Harry, Ron, and Hermione together.

"But Crouch didn't turn up for the match?"

"No," said Harry. "I think he said he'd been too busy."

Sirius paced all around the cave in silence. Then he said, "Harry, did you check your pockets for your wand after you'd left the Top Box?"

"Erm . . ." Harry thought hard. "No," he said finally. "I didn't need to use it before we got in the forest. And then I put my hand in my pocket, and all that was in there were my Omnioculars." He stared at Sirius. "Are you saying whoever conjured the Mark stole my wand in the Top Box?"

"It's possible," said Sirius.

"Winky didn't steal that wand!" Hermione insisted.

"The elf wasn't the only one in that box," said Sirius, his brow furrowed as he continued to pace. "Who else was sitting behind you?"

"Loads of people," said Harry. "Some Bulgarian ministers . . . Cornelius Fudge . . . the Malfoys . . ."

"The Malfoys!" said Ron suddenly, so loudly that his voice echoed all around the cave, and Buckbeak tossed his head nervously. "I bet it

was Lucius Malfoy!”

“Anyone else?” said Sirius.

“No one,” said Harry.

“Yes, there was, there was Ludo Bagman,” Hermione reminded him.

“Oh yeah . . .”

“I don’t know anything about Bagman except that he used to be Beater for the Wimbourne Wasps,” said Sirius, still pacing. “What’s he like?”

“He’s okay,” said Harry. “He keeps offering to help me with the Triwizard Tournament.”

“Does he, now?” said Sirius, frowning more deeply. “I wonder why he’d do that?”

“Says he’s taken a liking to me,” said Harry.

“Hmm,” said Sirius, looking thoughtful.

“We saw him in the forest just before the Dark Mark appeared,” Hermione told Sirius. “Remember?” she said to Harry and Ron.

“Yeah, but he didn’t stay in the forest, did he?” said Ron. “The moment we told him about the riot, he went off to the campsite.”

“How d’you know?” Hermione shot back. “How d’you know where he Disapparated to?”

“Come off it,” said Ron incredulously. “Are you saying you reckon Ludo Bagman conjured the Dark Mark?”

“It’s more likely he did it than Winky,” said Hermione stubbornly.

“Told you,” said Ron, looking meaningfully at Sirius, “told you she’s obsessed with house —”

But Sirius held up a hand to silence Ron.

“When the Dark Mark had been conjured, and the elf had been discovered holding Harry’s wand, what did Crouch do?”

“Went to look in the bushes,” said Harry, “but there wasn’t anyone else there.”

“Of course,” Sirius muttered, pacing up and down, “of course, he’d want to pin it on anyone but his own elf . . . and then he sacked her?”

“Yes,” said Hermione in a heated voice, “he sacked her, just because she hadn’t stayed in her tent and let herself get trampled —”

“Hermione, will you give it a rest with the elf!” said Ron.

Sirius shook his head and said, “She’s got the measure of Crouch better than you have, Ron. If you want to know what a man’s like, take a good look at how he treats his inferiors, not his equals.”

He ran a hand over his unshaven face, evidently thinking hard.

“All these absences of Barty Crouch’s . . . he goes to the trouble of making sure his house-elf saves him a seat at the Quidditch World Cup, but doesn’t bother to turn up and watch. He works very hard to reinstate the Triwizard Tournament, and then stops coming to that too. . . . It’s not like Crouch. If he’s ever taken a day off work because of illness before this, I’ll eat Buckbeak.”

“D’you know Crouch, then?” said Harry.

Sirius’s face darkened. He suddenly looked as menacing as he had the night when Harry first met him, the night when Harry still believed Sirius to be a murderer.

“Oh I know Crouch all right,” he said quietly. “He was the one who gave the order for me to be sent to Azkaban — without a trial.”

“*What?*” said Ron and Hermione together.

“You’re kidding!” said Harry.

“No, I’m not,” said Sirius, taking another great bite of chicken.

“Crouch used to be Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, didn’t you know?”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione shook their heads.

“He was tipped for the next Minister of Magic,” said Sirius. “He’s a great wizard, Barty Crouch, powerfully magical — and power-hungry. Oh never a Voldemort supporter,” he said, reading the look on Harry’s face. “No, Barty Crouch was always very outspoken against the Dark Side. But then a lot of people who were against the Dark Side . . . well, you wouldn’t understand . . . you’re too young . . .”

“That’s what my dad said at the World Cup,” said Ron, with a trace of irritation in his voice. “Try us, why don’t you?”

A grin flashed across Sirius’s thin face.

“All right, I’ll try you. . . .” He walked once up the cave, back again, and then said, “Imagine that Voldemort’s powerful now. You don’t know who his supporters are, you don’t know who’s working for him and who isn’t; you know he can control people so that they do terrible things without being able to stop themselves. You’re scared for yourself, and your family, and your friends. Every week, news comes of more deaths, more disappearances, more torturing . . . the Ministry of Magic’s in disarray, they don’t know what to do, they’re trying to keep everything hidden from the Muggles, but meanwhile, Muggles are dying too. Terror everywhere . . . panic . . . confusion . . . that’s how it used to be.

“Well, times like that bring out the best in some people and the

worst in others. Crouch's principles might've been good in the beginning — I wouldn't know. He rose quickly through the Ministry, and he started ordering very harsh measures against Voldemort's supporters. The Aurors were given new powers — powers to kill rather than capture, for instance. And I wasn't the only one who was handed straight to the dementors without trial. Crouch fought violence with violence, and authorized the use of the Unforgivable Curses against suspects. I would say he became as ruthless and cruel as many on the Dark Side. He had his supporters, mind you — plenty of people thought he was going about things the right way, and there were a lot of witches and wizards clamoring for him to take over as Minister of Magic. When Voldemort disappeared, it looked like only a matter of time until Crouch got the top job. But then something rather unfortunate happened. . . .” Sirius smiled grimly. “Crouch's own son was caught with a group of Death Eaters who'd managed to talk their way out of Azkaban. Apparently they were trying to find Voldemort and return him to power.”

“Crouch's *son* was caught?” gasped Hermione.

“Yep,” said Sirius, throwing his chicken bone to Buckbeak, flinging himself back down on the ground beside the loaf of bread, and tearing it in half. “Nasty little shock for old Barty, I'd imagine. Should have spent a bit more time at home with his family, shouldn't he? Ought to have left the office early once in a while . . . gotten to know his own son.”

He began to wolf down large pieces of bread.

“*Was* his son a Death Eater?” said Harry.

“No idea,” said Sirius, still stuffing down bread. “I was in

Azkaban myself when he was brought in. This is mostly stuff I've found out since I got out. The boy was definitely caught in the company of people I'd bet my life were Death Eaters — but he might have been in the wrong place at the wrong time, just like the house-elf.”

“Did Crouch try and get his son off?” Hermione whispered.

Sirius let out a laugh that was much more like a bark.

“Crouch let his son off? I thought you had the measure of him, Hermione! Anything that threatened to tarnish his reputation had to go; he had dedicated his whole life to becoming Minister of Magic. You saw him dismiss a devoted house-elf because she associated him with the Dark Mark again — doesn't that tell you what he's like? Crouch's fatherly affection stretched just far enough to give his son a trial, and by all accounts, it wasn't much more than an excuse for Crouch to show how much he hated the boy . . . then he sent him straight to Azkaban.”

“He gave his own son to the dementors?” asked Harry quietly.

“That's right,” said Sirius, and he didn't look remotely amused now. “I saw the dementors bringing him in, watched them through the bars in my cell door. He can't have been more than nineteen. They took him into a cell near mine. He was screaming for his mother by nightfall. He went quiet after a few days, though . . . they all went quiet in the end . . . except when they shrieked in their sleep. . . .”

For a moment, the deadened look in Sirius's eyes became more pronounced than ever, as though shutters had closed behind them.

“So he's still in Azkaban?” Harry said.

“No,” said Sirius dully. “No, he's not in there anymore. He died

about a year after they brought him in.”

“He *died*?”

“He wasn’t the only one,” said Sirius bitterly. “Most go mad in there, and plenty stop eating in the end. They lose the will to live. You could always tell when a death was coming, because the dementors could sense it, they got excited. That boy looked pretty sickly when he arrived. Crouch being an important Ministry member, he and his wife were allowed a deathbed visit. That was the last time I saw Barty Crouch, half carrying his wife past my cell. She died herself, apparently, shortly afterward. Grief. Wasted away just like the boy. Crouch never came for his son’s body. The dementors buried him outside the fortress; I watched them do it.”

Sirius threw aside the bread he had just lifted to his mouth and instead picked up the flask of pumpkin juice and drained it.

“So old Crouch lost it all, just when he thought he had it made,” he continued, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “One moment, a hero, poised to become Minister of Magic . . . next, his son dead, his wife dead, the family name dishonored, and, so I’ve heard since I escaped, a big drop in popularity. Once the boy had died, people started feeling a bit more sympathetic toward the son and started asking how a nice young lad from a good family had gone so badly astray. The conclusion was that his father never cared much for him. So Cornelius Fudge got the top job, and Crouch was shunted sideways into the Department of International Magical Cooperation.”

There was a long silence. Harry was thinking of the way Crouch’s eyes had bulged as he’d looked down at his disobedient house-elf back in the wood at the Quidditch World Cup. This, then, must have

been why Crouch had overreacted to Winky being found beneath the Dark Mark. It had brought back memories of his son, and the old scandal, and his fall from grace at the Ministry.

“Moody says Crouch is obsessed with catching Dark wizards,” Harry told Sirius.

“Yeah, I’ve heard it’s become a bit of a mania with him,” said Sirius, nodding. “If you ask me, he still thinks he can bring back the old popularity by catching one more Death Eater.”

“And he sneaked up here to search Snape’s office!” said Ron triumphantly, looking at Hermione.

“Yes, and that doesn’t make sense at all,” said Sirius.

“Yeah, it does!” said Ron excitedly, but Sirius shook his head.

“Listen, if Crouch wants to investigate Snape, why hasn’t he been coming to judge the tournament? It would be an ideal excuse to make regular visits to Hogwarts and keep an eye on him.”

“So you think Snape could be up to something, then?” asked Harry, but Hermione broke in.

“Look, I don’t care what you say, Dumbledore trusts Snape —”

“Oh give it a rest, Hermione,” said Ron impatiently. “I know Dumbledore’s brilliant and everything, but that doesn’t mean a really clever Dark wizard couldn’t fool him —”

“Why did Snape save Harry’s life in the first year, then? Why didn’t he just let him die?”

“I dunno — maybe he thought Dumbledore would kick him out —”

“What d’you think, Sirius?” Harry said loudly, and Ron and Hermione stopped bickering to listen.

“I think they’ve both got a point,” said Sirius, looking thoughtfully

at Ron and Hermione. “Ever since I found out Snape was teaching here, I’ve wondered why Dumbledore hired him. Snape’s always been fascinated by the Dark Arts, he was famous for it at school. Slimy, oily, greasy-haired kid, he was,” Sirius added, and Harry and Ron grinned at each other. “Snape knew more curses when he arrived at school than half the kids in seventh year, and he was part of a gang of Slytherins who nearly all turned out to be Death Eaters.”

Sirius held up his fingers and began ticking off names.

“Rosier and Wilkes — they were both killed by Aurors the year before Voldemort fell. The Lestranges — they’re a married couple — they’re in Azkaban. Avery — from what I’ve heard he wormed his way out of trouble by saying he’d been acting under the Imperius Curse — he’s still at large. But as far as I know, Snape was never even accused of being a Death Eater — not that that means much. Plenty of them were never caught. And Snape’s certainly clever and cunning enough to keep himself out of trouble.”

“Snape knows Karkaroff pretty well, but he wants to keep that quiet,” said Ron.

“Yeah, you should’ve seen Snape’s face when Karkaroff turned up in Potions yesterday!” said Harry quickly. “Karkaroff wanted to talk to Snape, he says Snape’s been avoiding him. Karkaroff looked really worried. He showed Snape something on his arm, but I couldn’t see what it was.”

“He showed Snape something on his arm?” said Sirius, looking frankly bewildered. He ran his fingers distractedly through his filthy hair, then shrugged again. “Well, I’ve no idea what that’s about . . . but if Karkaroff’s genuinely worried, and he’s going to Snape for

answers . . .”

Sirius stared at the cave wall, then made a grimace of frustration.

“There’s still the fact that Dumbledore trusts Snape, and I know Dumbledore trusts where a lot of other people wouldn’t, but I just can’t see him letting Snape teach at Hogwarts if he’d ever worked for Voldemort.”

“Why are Moody and Crouch so keen to get into Snape’s office then?” said Ron stubbornly.

“Well,” said Sirius slowly, “I wouldn’t put it past Mad-Eye to have searched every single teacher’s office when he got to Hogwarts. He takes his Defense Against the Dark Arts seriously, Moody. I’m not sure *he* trusts anyone at all, and after the things he’s seen, it’s not surprising. I’ll say this for Moody, though, he never killed if he could help it. Always brought people in alive where possible. He was tough, but he never descended to the level of the Death Eaters. Crouch, though . . . he’s a different matter . . . is he really ill? If he is, why did he make the effort to drag himself up to Snape’s office? And if he’s not . . . what’s he up to? What was he doing at the World Cup that was so important he didn’t turn up in the Top Box? What’s he been doing while he should have been judging the tournament?”

Sirius lapsed into silence, still staring at the cave wall. Buckbeak was ferreting around on the rocky floor, looking for bones he might have overlooked. Finally, Sirius looked up at Ron.

“You say your brother’s Crouch’s personal assistant? Any chance you could ask him if he’s seen Crouch lately?”

“I can try,” said Ron doubtfully. “Better not make it sound like I reckon Crouch is up to anything dodgy, though. Percy loves Crouch.”

“And you might try and find out whether they’ve got any leads on Bertha Jorkins while you’re at it,” said Sirius, gesturing to the second copy of the *Daily Prophet*.

“Bagman told me they hadn’t,” said Harry.

“Yes, he’s quoted in the article in there,” said Sirius, nodding at the paper. “Blustering on about how bad Bertha’s memory is. Well, maybe she’s changed since I knew her, but the Bertha I knew wasn’t forgetful at all — quite the reverse. She was a bit dim, but she had an excellent memory for gossip. It used to get her into a lot of trouble; she never knew when to keep her mouth shut. I can see her being a bit of a liability at the Ministry of Magic . . . maybe that’s why Bagman didn’t bother to look for her for so long. . . .”

Sirius heaved an enormous sigh and rubbed his shadowed eyes.

“What’s the time?”

Harry checked his watch, then remembered it hadn’t been working since it had spent over an hour in the lake.

“It’s half past three,” said Hermione.

“You’d better get back to school,” Sirius said, getting to his feet. “Now listen . . .” He looked particularly hard at Harry. “I don’t want you lot sneaking out of school to see me, all right? Just send notes to me here. I still want to hear about anything odd. But you’re not to go leaving Hogwarts without permission; it would be an ideal opportunity for someone to attack you.”

“No one’s tried to attack me so far, except a dragon and a couple of grindylows,” Harry said, but Sirius scowled at him.

“I don’t care . . . I’ll breathe freely again when this tournament’s over, and that’s not until June. And don’t forget, if you’re talking

about me among yourselves, call me Snuffles, okay?"

He handed Harry the empty napkin and flask and went to pat Buckbeak good-bye. "I'll walk to the edge of the village with you," said Sirius, "see if I can scrounge another paper."

He transformed into the great black dog before they left the cave, and they walked back down the mountainside with him, across the boulder-strewn ground, and back to the stile. Here he allowed each of them to pat him on the head, before turning and setting off at a run around the outskirts of the village. Harry, Ron, and Hermione made their way back into Hogsmeade and up toward Hogwarts.

"Wonder if Percy knows all that stuff about Crouch?" Ron said as they walked up the drive to the castle. "But maybe he doesn't care . . . it'd probably just make him admire Crouch even more. Yeah, Percy loves rules. He'd just say Crouch was refusing to break them for his own son."

"Percy would never throw any of his family to the dementors," said Hermione severely.

"I don't know," said Ron. "If he thought we were standing in the way of his career . . . Percy's really ambitious, you know. . . ."

They walked up the stone steps into the entrance hall, where the delicious smells of dinner wafted toward them from the Great Hall.

"Poor old Snuffles," said Ron, breathing deeply. "He must really like you, Harry. . . . Imagine having to live off rats."

Kussingvoet Kom Weer

Een van die beste dinge van die nadraai van die tweede taak is dat almal so gretig is om te hoor wat alles onder in die nêr gebeur het dat Ron Harry se kalklig vir 'n verandering deel. Harry kom agter dat Ron se weergawe van wat gebeur het effens verander elke keer dat hy dit oorvertel. Aan die begin hou hy getrou by die waarheid wel, dit stem met Hermien se weergawe ooreen – Dompeldorius het aldie gyselaars in professor McGonagall se kantoor in 'n betowerde slaaf laat val nadat hy hulle eers verseker het dat hulle heeltemal veilig sal wees en wakker sal word wanneer hulle weer bo die water is. 'n Week later vertel Ron egter 'n spannende verhaal van ontvoering waarin hy homself manalleen teen vyftig swaar gewapende meermense versit het wat hom met geweld moes oorrompel voor hulle hom kon vasmaak.

“Maar ek het my towerstaf in my mou versteek gehad,” stel hy vir Padma Patel gerus wat nou baie meer van Ron hou vandat hy soveel aandag kry en 'n punt daarvan maak om met hom te praat elke keer dat hulle in die gange verby mekaar stap. “Ek kon daardie meerswape net wanneer ek wou, oorrompel.”

“Wat sou jy gedoen het, vir hulle gesnork het?” sê Hermien snydend. Sy is al soveel keer geterg omdat sy die ding is wat Viktor Krum die meeste sou mis dat sy omtrent knorrig is.

Ron se ore word rooi en hierna val hy terug op die betowerde slaafweergawe van wat gebeur het.

Aan die begin van Maart raak die weer droër, maar 'n snerpende wind byt aan hul gesigte en hande elke keer dat hulle uitgaan terrein toe. Die pos word vertraag omdat die uile van koers af gewaai word. Die bruin uil wat Harry met die datum van die Hogsmeade-naweek na Sirius toe gestuur het, daag een Vrydag tydens ontbyt met windverwaaide vere op. Harry het Sirius se antwoord skaars afgehaal of die uil vlieg weg, oënskynlik bevrees dat hy weer iewers heen gestuur gaan word.

Sirius se brief is amper net so kort soos die vorige een.

Ek kry jou Saterdagmiddag om twee-uur by die oorhek aan die end van

die pad wat uit Hogsmeade lei (anderkant Derwisj & Boems). Bring soveel kos as wat jy kan.

“Het hy tog nie terug Hogsmeade toe gekom nie?” sê Ron ongelowig.

“Dit lyk so, nie waar nie?” sê Hermien.

“Ek kan dit nie glo nie,” sê Harry gespanne. “As hy gevang word . . .”

“Hy het so ver oorlewe, hè?” sê Ron. “En dis nie asof die plek nog krioel van Dementors nie.”

Harry vou die brief ingedagte toe. As hy eerlik met homself moet wees, moet hy erken dat hy Sirius regtig graag weer wil sien. Toe hy dus na die laaste middagklas gaan – dubbele Towerdrankies – voel hy heelwat meer opgewek as wat hy gewoonlik voel wanneer hy met die trappe af kerkers toe stap.

Malfoy, Krabbe en Goliat staan koppe bymekaar voor die klaskamer se deur saam met Pansy Parkinson en haar groep Slibberinmeisies. Hulle kyk almal na iets wat Harry nie kan sien nie terwyl hulle alte lekker giggel. Pansy se mopshondgesig loer opgewonde om Goliat se breë rug toe Harry, Ron en Hermien nader kom.

“Daar is hulle, daar is hulle!” giggel sy en die bondel Slibberins gaan uitmekaar. Harry sien dat Pansy ’n tydskrif vashou – *Heks en Haard*. Die bewegende prent op die voorblad is van ’n krulhaarheks wat tanderig glimlag en met haar towerstaf na ’n groot sponskoek wys.

“Daar’s iets hierin wat jou sal interesseer, La Grange!” sê Pansy hard toe sy die tydskrif na Hermien gooi, wat verskrik lyk toe sy dit vang. Op daardie oomblik gaan die kerkerdeur oop en Snerp beduie dat hulle moet inkom.

Hermien, Harry en Ron gaan soos gewoonlik na ’n tafel agterin die kerker. Toe Snerp sy rug op hulle draai om die bestanddele vir die dag se towerdrankie op die bord te skryf, blaai Hermien haastig deur die tydskrif wat sy onder die lessenaar hou. Uiteindelik, reg in die middel, kry Hermien wat hulle soek. Harry en Ron leun nader. Daar is ’n kleurfoto van Harry boaan ’n kort beriggie met die titel: HARRY POTTER SE GEHEIME HARTSEER.

’n Seun soos geen ander seun nie – en tog ook ’n seun wat al die gewone pyne van adolessensie ervaar, skryf Rika Skinner. Beroof van liefde sedert die tragiese heengaan van sy ouers, het die veertienjarige Harry Potter gereken dat hy troos gevind het by sy vaste vriendin by Hogwarts, Moggelgebore Hermien la Grange. Min het hy geweet dat hy binnekort verdere emosionele verliese sal ly in ’n lewe wat reeds deur persoonlike smart gekenmerk word.

Dit lyk asof mej. La Grange, ’n gewone dog ambisieuse meisie, ’n voorliefde het vir beroemde towenaars wat Harry alleen nie kan bevree-

dig nie. Sedert die aankoms by Hogwarts van Viktor Krum, die Bulgaarse Soeker en held van die vorige Wêreld-Kwiddiekbeker, speel mej. La Grange openlik met beide seuns se gevoelens. Krum, wat sy hart duidelik op die slinkse mej. La Grange verloor het, het haar reeds genooi om tydens die Bulgaarse somervakansie by hom te kom kuier en hou vol dat hy “nog nooit so oor ’n meisie gevoel het nie”.

Dit is egter onwaarskynlik dat dit mej. La Grange se twyfelagtige natuurlike sjarme is wat hierdie twee ongelukkige seuns se oog gevang het.

“Sy’s eintlik regtig lelik,” sê Pansy Parkinson, ’n aanvallige en lewendige vierdejaargestudent, “maar sy’s heeltemal daartoe in staat om ’n Liefdesdrankie te maak, sy’s nogal slim. Ek dink dis hoe sy dit doen.”

Liefdesdrankies is natuurlik verbode by Hogwarts en Albus Dimpeldorius sal hierdie beskuldigings ongetwyfeld wil ondersoek. Intussen moet Harry Potter se ondersteuners hoop dat hy sy hart volgende keer op ’n meer waardige kandidaat sal verloor.

“Ek het jou gesê!” sis Ron vir Hermien wat nog na die artikel staar. “Ek het gesê jy moenie vir Rika Skinner kwaad maak nie! Sy maak nou asof jy die een of ander soort – soort sedelose vrou is!”

Nou lyk Hermien nie meer verbaas nie. Sy snork van die lag.

“Sedelose vrou?” herhaal sy toe sy omkyk na Ron terwyl sy sukkel om ’n giggelbui te onderdruk.

“Dis wat my ma hulle noem,” brom Ron en sy ore word opnuut rooi.

“As dit die ergste is wat Rika kan doen, is sy besig om haar slag te verloor,” sê Hermien giggelend toe sy die *Heks en Haard* op die leë sitplek langs haar neergooi. “Wat ’n absolute spul twak.”

Sy kyk na die Slibberins wat almal vir haar en Harry dophou om te sien of die berig hulle ontstel het. Hermien glimlag en wuif sarkasties vir hulle en sy, Harry en Ron begin om die bestanddele wat hulle vir die Vlymskerpverstand-towerdrankie nodig het uit te pak.

“Daar is egter iets snaaks,” sê Hermien sowat tien minute later terwyl sy haar stamper in die lug bo ’n bakkie vol skarabeekewers hou. “Hoe het Rika Skinner geweet . . .?”

“Wat geweet?” sê Ron vinnig. “Jy het darem seker nie regtig Liefdesdrankies staan en aanmaak nie, hè?”

“Moenie onnosel wees nie,” snou Hermien hom toe terwyl sy die kewers verder fyndruk. “Nee, dis net . . . hoe het sy geweet dat Viktor my gevra het om hierdie somervakansie by hulle te gaan kuier?”

Hermien bloos bloedrooi toe sy dit sê en maak ’n punt daarvan om Ron se oë te vermy.

“Wat?” sê Ron en hy laat sy stamper met ’n dawerende geluid val.

“Hy’t my gevra net na hy my uit die meer gehaal het,” mompel Her-

mien. “Nadat hy van die haai se kop ontslae geraak het. Madame Pomfrey het vir ons albei komberse gegee en toe het hy my so half van die beoordelaars af weggesleep sodat hulle nie moet hoor nie en gesê dat as ek hierdie somervakansie niks het om te doen nie, wat daarvan as ek –”

“En wat het jy gesê?” sê Ron wat so na Hermien staar dat hy besig is om sy stamper, wat hy intussen weer opgetel het, in die tafel in te boor, ’n hele ent van sy bakkie af.

“En hy het gesê dat hy nog nooit so oor enigiemand gevoel het nie,” gaan Hermien voort. Sy is nou so rooi dat Harry amper kan voel hoe die hitte uit haar opslaan. “Maar hoe kon Rika Skinner hom gehoor het? Sy was nie daar nie . . . of was sy? Dalk het sy ’n onsigbaarheidsmantel, dalk het sy die terrein binnegegryp om na die tweede taak te kyk . . .”

“En wat het jy gesê?” sê Ron wat nou so woest met sy stamper te kere gaan dat daar ’n duik in die tafel is.

“Wel, ek was te besig om te kyk of jy en Harry oukei is om –”

“Fassinerend soos jou sosiale lewe ongetwyfeld is, juffrou La Grange,” sê ’n ysige stem reg agter hulle, “moet ek jou vra om dit nie in die klas te bespreek nie. Griffindor verloor tien punte.”

Terwyl hulle gepraat het, het Snerp van sy lessenaar af na hulle toe gesluip. Nou kyk die hele klas na hulle; Malfoy gebruik die geleentheid om POTTER STINK oor die kerker vir Harry te flits.

“A . . . lees boonop tydskrifte onder die tafel?” voeg Snerp by toe hy die eksemplaar van *Heks en Haard* optel. “Nog tien punte van Griffindor af . . . o, maar natuurlik . . .” Snerp se swart oë glinster toe hulle op Rika Skinner se artikel tot rus kom. “Potter moet byhou met sy koerantknipsels . . .”

Die kerker weergalm soos die Slibberins lag en ’n onaangename glimlaggie krul om Snerp se dun mond. Tot Harry se woede begin hy om die artikel hardop voor te lees.

“*Harry Potter se Geheime Hartseer* . . . nou toe nou, Potter, wat skort? ’n Seun soos geen ander seun nie . . .”

Harry voel hoe sy gesig brand. Snerp talm ’n oomblik aan die einde van elke sin om die Slibberins kans te gee om hartlik te lag. Die berig klink tien maal erger wanneer dit deur Snerp voorgelees word.

“. . . Intussen moet Harry Potter se ondersteuners hoop dat hy sy hart volgende keer op ’n meer waardige kandidaat sal verloor. Hoe uiters roerend,” sê Snerp smalend toe hy die tydskrif oprol terwyl die Slibberins dawerend lag. “Wel, ek dink ek moet die drie van julle dalk eerder skei sodat julle aan jul towerdrankies kan aandag gee in plaas van aan jul verknoopte liefdeslewens. Weasley, jy bly hier. Mej. La Grange, daar anderkant langs mej. Parkinson. Potter – daardie tafel voor my lessenaar. Loop. Dadelik.”

Harry is woedend toe hy sy bestanddele en sy sak in sy hekseketel gooi

en dit na die leë tafel voor in die kerker sleep. Snerp stap agterna, gaan sit op sy lessenaar en kyk hoe Harry sy hekseketel uitpak. Harry is vasberade om nie na Snerp te kyk nie en gaan voort om die skarabeekewers fyn te maal terwyl hy hom verbeel dat elkeen van hulle soos Snerp lyk.

“Dit lyk asof al die aandag in die pers jou reeds oorgroot kop nog verder opgeblaas het, Potter,” sê Snerp onderlangs toe die res van die klas tot bedaring gekom het.

Harry antwoord nie. Hy weet dat Snerp hom probeer kwaad maak; hy het dit al tevore gedoen. Hy hoop ongetwyfeld om ’n rede te kry om voor die einde van die klas ’n volle vyftig punte van Griffindor af te trek.

“Jy mag dalk onder die wanindruk verkeer dat die hele towenaars-wêreld beïndruk is met jou,” gaan Snerp voort, so sag dat niemand anders hom kan hoor nie (Harry gaan voort om sy skarabeekewers te maal hoewel hulle reeds tot ’n fyn poeier verbrysel is), “maar vir my maak dit nie saak hoeveel keer jou foto in die koerante verskyn nie. Vir my, Potter, is jy bloot ’n nare klein seuntjie wat reken dat reëls benede hom is.”

Harry kantel die verpoeierde kewers in sy hekseketel uit en begin om sy gemmerwortels op te kap. Sy hande skud effens van woede, maar hy hou sy oë neergeslaan en maak of hy nie kan hoor wat Snerp vir hom sê nie.

“Ek gee jou dus ’n billike waarskuwing, Potter,” gaan Snerp voort, in ’n stem wat nog sagter en gevaarliker as tevore klink, “piepklein beroemdheid ofte not – as ek jou moet betrap waar jy nog een keer by my kantoor inbreek –”

“Ek was nie naby jou kantoor nie!” sê Harry vererg en hy vergeet skoon dat hy kamma doof is.

“Moenie vir my lieg nie,” sis Snerp en sy peillose swart oë boor in Harry s’n. “Boomslangvel. Kieuwier. Albei kom uit my privaat voorraad en ek weet wie dit gesteel het.”

Harry is vasberade om nie sy oë te knip of skuldig te lyk toe hy na Snerp terugstaar nie. Hy het, in alle eerlikheid, nie een van daardie goed by Snerp gesteel nie. Hermien het die Boomslangvel in hul tweede jaar gevat – hulle moes dit vir die Polisouspaljas hê – en hoewel Snerp destyds vir Harry verdink het, kon hy dit nog nooit bewys nie. Dit was natuurlik Dobbi wat die Kieugras gesteel het.

“Ek weet nie waarvan jy praat nie,” lieg Harry in ’n yskoue stem.

“Die nag toe daar by my kantoor ingebreek is, was jy nie in jou bed nie!” sis Snerp. “Ek weet dit, Potter! Maloog Moodie het dalk by jou bewonderaarsklub aangesluit, maar ek sal sulke gedrag nie duld nie! Nog een nagtelike besoek aan my kantoor, Potter, en jy sal betaal!”

“Goed,” sê Harry koeltjies terwyl hy hom weer met sy gemmerwortels besig hou, “ek sal dit onthou wanneer ek eendag die drang voel om soon-toe te gaan.”

Snerp se oë blits. Hy steek sy hand onder sy swart kleed in. Vir een wilde oomblik dink Harry dat Snerp sy towerstaf gaan uitruk en hom gaan vervloek – dan sien hy dat Snerp ’n klein kristalflessie waarin ’n helder vloeistof is uitgehaal het.

“Weet jy wat dit is, Potter?” sê Snerp en sy oë glinster weer eens gevaarlik.

“Nee,” sê Harry wat hierdie keer heeltemal eerlik is.

“Dit is Veritaserum – ’n Waarheidsdrankie wat so kragtig is dat drie druppels genoeg is dat jy al jou bes bewaarde geheime vir die hele klas sal uitblaker,” sê Snerp venynig. “Die gebruik van hierdie Towerdrankie word deur baie streng riglyne van die Ministerie beheer. Indien jy egter nie lig trap nie, mag jy vind dat my hand *glip* –” hy skud die kristalflessie so effens, “– reg oor jou aand se pampoensap. En dan, Potter . . . dan sal ons uitvind of jy in my kantoor was of nie.”

Harry antwoord nie. Hy keer terug na sy gemmerwortels, tel sy mes op en begin om hulle verder op te sny. Hy hou net mooi niks van wat hy oor die Waarheidserum gehoor het nie en sal glad nie verbaas wees as Snerp wel ongemerk vir hom daarvan ingee nie. Hy onderdruk ’n siddering by die gedagte aan wat alles uit sy mond sal kom as Snerp dit wel sou doen . . . buiten al die mense wat in die moeilikheid sal beland – Hermien en Dobbi om mee te begin – is daar ook al die ander goed wat hy wegsteek . . . soos die feit dat hy met Sirius in aanraking is . . . en – sy binnegoed kriewel by die gedagte – hoe hy oor Cho voel . . . Hy kantel sy gemmerwortels ook in die hekseketel en wonder of hy Moodie se voorbeeld moet volg en ook net uit sy eie heupfles moet drink.

Daar is ’n klop aan die kerkerdeur.

“Kom binne,” sê Snerp in sy gewone stem.

Toe die deur oopgaan, kyk die klas om. Professor Karkaroff kom in. Almal kyk na hom toe hy na Snerp se lessenaar stap. Hy is weer besig om sy bokbaardjie om sy vinger te draai en hy lyk besonder opgewonde.

“Ons moet praat,” sê Karkaroff kortaf toe hy by Snerp kom. Hy lyk so vasberade dat niemand moet hoor wat hy sê nie dat hy sy lippe skaars oopmaak; dit laat hom soos ’n besonder swak buikspreker lyk. Harry hou sy oë op sy gemmerwortels terwyl hy fyn luister.

“Ek sal na die les met jou praat, Karkaroff –” mompel Snerp, maar Karkaroff val hom in die rede.

“Ek moet nou praat terwyl jy nie kan wegkom nie, Severus. Jy vermy my.”

“Na die les,” snou Snerp.

Onder die voorwendsel dat hy ’n maatkoppie in die lug hou om te sien of hy genoeg armadilgal afgemeet het, loer Harry onderlangs na hulle. Karkaroff lyk uiters bekommerd en Snerp lyk kwaad.

Vir die res van die dubbele periode staan Karkaroff agter Snerp se

lessenaar. Dit lyk asof hy vasberade is om seker te maak dat Snerp nie aan die einde van die klas wegglip nie. Harry is gretig om te hoor wat Karkaroff te sê het en sowat twee minute voor die klok moet lui, stamp hy sy bottel armadilgal aspris om sodat hy 'n rede het om agter sy heksekettel in te kies om dit op te vee terwyl die res van die klas raserig deur toe stap.

“Wat is so dringend?” hoor hy Snerp vir Karkaroff sis.

“Dit,” sê Karkaroff en toe Harry om die kant van sy heksekettel loer, sien hy hoe Karkaroff die linkerhandse mou van sy kleed opstoot en iets aan die binnekant van sy voorarm vir Snerp wys.

“Wel?” sê Karkaroff wat nog steeds sy bes doen om nie sy lippe te beweeg nie. “Het jy gesien? Dit was nog nooit tevore so duidelik nie, nie sedert –”

“Maak dit toe!” snou Snerp en sy swart oë speel oor die klaskamer.

“Maar jy moet tog gesien het dat –” begin Karkaroff in 'n opgewonde stem.

“Ons kan later praat, Karkaroff!” spoeg Snerp. “Potter! Wat maak jy?”

“Vee net my armadilgal op, professor,” sê Harry onskuldig terwyl hy orent kom en die deurweekte lap vir Snerp wys.

Karkaroff draai op sy hak om en marsjeer uit die kerker. Hy lyk bekommerd sowel as kwaad. Harry is nie lus om alleen saam met 'n besonder woedende Snerp in die kerker agter te bly nie en maak homself blitsig uit die voete om vir Ron en Hermien te gaan vertel wat hy so pas gesien het.

Toe hulle die kasteel teen twaalfuur die volgende dag verlaat, skyn 'n flou silwer sonnetjie oor die terrein. Die weer is draagliker as wat dit nog die hele jaar was en teen die tyd dat hulle in Hogsmeade aankom, het al drie van hulle hul mantels afgehaal en oor hul skouers gegooi. Die kos wat Sirius gesê het hulle moet bring, is in Harry se sak; hulle het tydens middagete 'n dosyn hoenderboudjies, 'n brood en 'n fles pampoensap van die tafel af gegaps.

Hulle gaan na Kispak vir Towerdrag om vir Dobbi 'n present te koop en geniet dit om die snaaksste sokkies waarop hulle hul hande kan lê uit te soek, insluitend 'n paar met flitsende goue en silwer sterre en 'n paar wat hard skree wanneer hulle te sleg begin ruik. Toe, teen halftwee, stap hulle in Hoogstraat op verby Derwisj en Boems na die buitewyke van die dorp.

Harry was nog nooit tevore hier rond nie. Die kronkelpaadjie lei hulle na die velde rondom Hogsmeade. Hier is minder huise en groter tuine; hulle stap na die voet van die berg wat bo Hogsmeade uittroon. Toe hulle om 'n draai gaan, sien hulle 'n oorhek aan die kant van die laan. 'n Groot, harige swart hond wat 'n paar koerante in sy bek vashou en baie bekend lyk, staan met sy pote op die boonste spar en wag.

“Hallo, Sirius,” sê Harry toe hulle by hom kom.

Die swart hond ruik gretig aan Harry se sak, waai sy stert en begin om oor die oorgroeide stuk grond wat na die rotsagtige voet van die berg lei te draf. Harry, Ron en Hermien klim oor die hek en sit hom agterna.

Sirius lei hulle na die voet van die berg waar die grond besaai is met klippe en rotse. Dit is maklik vir hom met sy vier pote, maar Harry, Ron en Hermien is gou uitasem. Hulle volg Sirius al hoër tot bo-op die berg. Vir so te sê ’n halfuur klim hulle langs ’n kronkelende en klipperige paadjie al agter Sirius se waaiende stert aan. Die son laat hulle sweet en die skouerbande van Harry se sak sny in sy skouers in.

Dan verdwyn Sirius uit sig en toe hulle op die plek kom waar hy weggeraak het, sien hulle ’n smal skeur in die rots. Hulle druk deur dit en bevind hulself in ’n koel, dofverligte grot. Vasmag aan die een kant met die punt van sy tou om ’n groot rots, staan Bokbok die Hippogrief, half grys perd, half reusearend. Bokbok se oranje oë flits toe hy die drie-stuks sien. Al drie van hulle buig laag voor hom en nadat hy vir ’n oomblik uit die hoogte na hulle gestaar het, knak Bokbok sy skubberige knieë en laat Hermien toe om nader te storm en sy geveerde nek te streel. Harry kyk egter na die swart hond wat so pas in sy peetpa verander het.

Sirius dra ’n toingrige grys kleed; dieselfde kleed wat hy aangehad het toe hy uit Azkaban gekom het. Sy swart hare is langer as toe hy in die kaggel verskyn het en is weer eens gekoek en slordig. Hy lyk baie maer.

“Hoender!” sê hy skor nadat hy die ou *Daaglikse Profete* uit sy mond gehaal en op die grot se vloer neergegooi het.

Harry maak sy sak oop en gee die pakkie hoenderboudjies en brood vir hom aan.

“Dankie,” sê Sirius toe hy dit oopmaak, ’n hoenderboudjie gryp en op die grot se vloer gaan sit om ’n groot hap met sy tande af te skeur. “Leef hoofsaaklik van rotte. Kan nie te veel kos by Hogsmeade steel nie; sal aandag trek.”

Hy grinnik vir Harry en Harry glimlag onwillig terug.

“Hoekom is jy hier, Sirius?” sê hy.

“Kom my pligte as peetpa na,” sê Sirius terwyl hy nogal baie soos ’n hond aan die hoenderbeen kou. “Moet jou nie oor my bekommer nie, ek maak of ek ’n liefdevolle rondloperhond is.”

Hy grinnik nog steeds, maar toe hy die kommer op Harry se gesig sien, sê hy meer besadig, “Ek moet in die nabyheid wees. Jou laaste brief . . . wel, kom ons sê dinge lyk meer verdag. Ek steel die koerant elke keer dat iemand een weggooi en te oordeel na hoe dinge lyk, is ek nie die enigste een wat bekommerd is nie.”

Hy knik na die vergeelde *Daaglikse Profete* wat op die grot se vloer lê en Ron tel dit op en vou dit oop.

Harry staan egter nog steeds na Sirius. “Wat as hulle jou vang? Wat as iemand jou sien?”

“Hier rond is dit net julle drie en Dompeldorius wat weet dat ek ’n Animagus is,” sê Sirius skouerophalend terwyl hy voortgaan om die hoenderboudjie te verslind.

Ron stamp aan Harry en gee die *Daaglikse Profete* vir hom aan. Daar is twee; die eerste het as hoofopskrif *Geheimsinnige Verdwyning van Barte-mius Crouch* en die tweede, *Heks van Ministerie Steeds Vermis – Minister vir Towerkuns Nou Persoonlik Betrokke*.

Harry kyk na die storie oor Crouch. Sinsnedes spring na hom: *nie in die openbaar gesien sedert November . . . woning oënskynlik verlate . . . Sint Mungo se Hospitaal vir Magiese Kwinte en Kwale nie bereid om kommentaar te lewer . . . Ministerie weier om gerugte van kritieke siekte te weerlê . . .*

“Dit klink asof hy besig is om dood te gaan,” sê Harry stadig. “Maar hy kan nie so siek wees as hy dit kan regkry om hierheen . . .”

“My broer is Crouch se persoonlike assistent,” lig Ron vir Sirius in. “Hy sê Crouch is oorwerk.”

“Ek moet sê, hy het siek gelyk toe ek hom laas van naby gesien het,” sê Harry stadig terwyl hy nog steeds die berig lees. “Die aand toe my naam uit die Beker gekom het . . .”

“Boontjie kry maar net sy loontjie omdat hy vir Knipogies laat loop het, nie waar nie?” sê Hermien kil. Sy streel nog steeds vir Bokbok wat besig is om Sirius se hoenderbene fyn te kou. “Ek wed hy wens nou dat hy dit nie gedoen het nie – wed hy voel die verskil nou dat sy nie daar is om hom te versorg nie.”

“Hermien is behep met huiselwe,” mompel Ron teenoor Sirius terwyl hy somber na Hermien kyk.

Sirius lyk egter geïnteresseerd. “Crouch het sy huiself laat loop?”

“Ja, by die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker,” sê Harry en hy begin om die verhaal van die Donker Merk se verskyning en Knipogies wat met Harry se towerstaf in die hand gevind is en mnr. Crouch se woede te vertel.

Toe Harry klaar is, is Sirius reeds orent en loop hy op en af in die grot. “Laat ek dit mooi agtermekaar kry,” sê hy na ’n rukkjie terwyl hy nog ’n hoenderboudjie deur die lug swaai. “Die eerste keer dat julle die elf gesien het, was daar in die boonste losie. Sy het vir Crouch plek gehou, reg?”

“Reg,” sê Harry, Ron en Hermien tegelyk.

“Maar Crouch het nie vir die wedstryd opgedaag nie?”

“Nee,” sê Harry. “Ek dink hy’t gesê hy was te besig.”

Sirius stap in stilte in die grot rond. Toe sê hy, “Harry, het jy in jou sakke gekyk of jou towerstaf daar is nadat julle die boonste losie verlaat het?”

“H’m . . .” Harry dink hard. “Nee,” sê hy uiteindelik. “Ek het dit eers

nodig gehad toe ons in die woud gekom het. En toe ek my hand in my sak gesteek het, kon ek net my Omnikyker kry." Hy staar na Sirius. "Wil jy sê dat wie ook al die Merk opgetower het, my towerstaf daar in die boonste losie gesteel het?"

"Dis moontlik," sê Sirius.

"Knipogies het *nie* daardie towerstaf gesteel nie!" sê Hermien skril.

"Die elf was nie die enigste een in daardie losie nie," sê Sirius en hy trek sy voorkop op 'n plooi terwyl hy voortgaan om op en af te loop.

"Wie het nog almal agter jou gesit?"

"Tonne mense," sê Harry. "'n Paar Bulgaarse ministers . . . Cornelius Broddelwerk . . . die Malfoys . . ."

"Die Malfoys!" sê Ron skielik, so hard dat sy stem deur die grot eggo en Bokbok sy kop senuagtig agteroor gooi. "Ek wed dit was Lucius Malfoy!"

"Enigiemand anders?" sê Sirius.

"Niemand nie," sê Harry.

"Ja, daar was, daar was Ludo Bagman," herinner Hermien hom.

"O ja . . ."

"Ek weet niks van Ludo Bagman af nie, behalwe dat hy 'n Breker vir die Wimbourne Wasps was," sê Sirius wat nog steeds op en neer loop.

"Hoe is hy?"

"Hy's oukei," sê Harry. "Hy hou aan om my met die Drietowenaars-toernooi te wil help."

"O, nogal?" sê Sirius en hy frons nog dieper. "Ek wonder hoekom hy dit wil doen?"

"Sê hy hou van my," sê Harry.

"Hmm," sê Sirius en hy lyk ingedagte.

"Ons het hom in die woud gesien net voor die Donker Merk verskyn het," vertel Hermien vir Sirius. "Onthou?" sê sy vir Harry en Ron.

"Ja, maar hy't nie in die bos gebly nie, het hy?" sê Ron. "Die oomblik dat ons hom van die oproer vertel het, het hy na die kampeerterrein toe teruggegaan."

"Hoe weet jy?" kap Hermien terug. "Hoe kan jy weet waarheen hy Gedisappareer het?"

"Moenie simpel wees nie," sê Ron ongelowig. "Probeer jy miskien sê dat Ludo Bagman die Donker Merk opgetower het?"

"Dis eerder hy as Knipogies," sê Hermien koppig.

"Het mos gesê," sê Ron en hy kyk betekenisvol na Sirius, "het vir jou gesê sy's behep met huis—"

Sirius hou egter sy hand op om Ron stil te maak. "Toe die Donker Merk opgetower is en die elf met Harry se towerstaf gevind is, wat het Crouch toe gedoen?"

"In die bosse gaan rondkyk," sê Harry, "maar daar was niemand anders nie."

“Natuurlik,” mompel Sirius terwyl hy op en af stap, “natuurlik sal hy enigiemand anders as sy eie elf wil blameer . . . en toe dank hy haar af?”

“Ja,” sê Hermien en haar stem is vol emosie, “hy’t haar laat loop net omdat sy nie in haar tent gebly en haarself laat plattrap het nie –”

“Hermien, sal jy *ophou* oor daardie elf!” sê Ron.

Sirius skud egter sy kop en sê, “Sy’t vir Crouch beter opgesom as jy, Ron. As jy wil weet hoe ’n man is, moet jy goed kyk hoe hy sy minderes behandel, nie sy gelykes nie.”

Hy vryf oor sy ongeskeerde gesig en dis duidelik dat hy diep dink. “Al hierdie kere dat Barty Crouch afwesig was . . . hy doen die moeite om seker te maak dat sy huiself vir hom ’n plek by die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker hou, maar daag dan nie op om te kom kyk nie. Hy werk kliphard om die Drietowenaarstoernooi weer in te stel en hou dan op om soontoe te gaan . . . dis nie hoe Crouch is nie. As hy al ooit ’n dag afgevat het omdat hy siek voel, eet ek vir Bokbok op.”

“Ken jy dan vir Crouch?” sê Harry.

Sirius se gesig word donker. Skielik lyk hy net so dreigend soos daardie nag toe Harry hom die eerste keer ontmoet het, die nag toe Harry nog geglo het dat Sirius ’n moordenaar is.

“O, ek ken vir Crouch,” sê hy sag. “Dit was hy wat opdrag gegee het dat ek na Azkaban moet gaan – sonder verhoor.”

“Wat?” sê Ron en Hermien gelyk.

“Jy jok!” sê Harry.

“Nee, ek jok nie,” sê Sirius terwyl hy nog ’n groot hap hoender vat. “Crouch was Hoof van die Departement vir Magiese Wetstoepassing, het julle dan nie geweet nie?”

Harry, Ron en Hermien skud hul koppe.

“Hy was op die kortlys as volgende Minister vir Towerkuns,” sê Sirius. “Hy’s ’n groot towenaar, Barty Crouch, magies geweldig magtig – en magshonger. O, nooit ’n ondersteuner van Woldemort nie,” sê hy toe hy die uitdrukking op Harry se gesig sien. “Nee, Barty Crouch was altyd baie uitgesproke oor hoe hy die Donker Kant teenwerk. Maar dan, baie mense wat teen die Donker Kant was . . . wel, julle sal nie verstaan nie . . . julle’s te jonk . . .”

“Dis wat my pa ook by die Wêreldbeker gesê het,” sê Ron met ’n sweem van irritasie in sy stem. “Kyk of ons verstaan, oukei, hoekom nie?”

’n Glimlag flits oor Sirius se skraal gesig. “Goed, ek sal . . .”

Weer loop hy op en af in die grot en dan sê hy, “Verbeel julle dat Woldemort nou magtig is. Julle weet nie wie sy ondersteuners is nie, julle weet nie wie vir hom werk en wie nie; julle weet dat hy mense kan beheer sodat hulle verskriklike goed doen sonder dat hulle hulself kan verhelp. Julle is bang vir juiself en vir jul familie en vriende. Elke week is

daar nuus van nog sterftes, nog verdwynings, nog martelings . . . die Ministerie vir Towerkuns is in 'n harwar, hulle weet nie wat om te doen nie, hulle probeer om alles vir die Moggels weg te steek, maar intussen gaan Moggels ook dood. Terreur heers oral . . . paniek . . . verwarring . . . dis hoe dit was.

“Wel, tye soos dié bring die beste in sommige mense na vore en in andere die slegste. Crouch se beginsels was dalk aanvanklik goed – ek sal nie weet nie. Hy het vinnig in die Ministerie opgang gemaak en het begin om streng maatreëls teen Woldemort se ondersteuners toe te pas. Die Aurors het nuwe magte gekry – die mag om te dood, eerder as om bloot te arresteer, byvoorbeeld. Ek was ook nie die enigste een wat sonder verhoor aan die Dementors uitgelewer is nie. Crouch het geweld met geweld beveg en die gebruik van die Onvergeeflike Vloek teen verdagtes gewettig. Hy het net so gewetenloos en wreed soos baie van dié aan die Donker Kant geword. Moet my nie verkeerd verstaan nie, hy het sy ondersteuners gehad – baie mense was van mening dat hy die regte ding doen en baie hekse en towenaars het daarop gestaan dat hy as Minister vir Towerkuns moet oorneem. Toe Woldemort verdwyn het, het dit gelyk of Crouch binnekort die hoogste pos sou kry. Maar toe het iets onvoorsiens gebeur . . .” Sirius grimlag. “Crouch se eie seun is betrap in die geselskap van 'n groep Doodseters wat daarin geslaag het om hulself uit Azkaban los te praat. Hulle was oënskynlik op soek na Woldemort om hom weer magtig te maak.”

“Crouch se seun is gevang?” sê Hermien en sy snak na asem.

“Jip,” sê Sirius en hy gooi sy hoenderbeen na Bokbok en slinger homself op die grond langs die stuk brood neer wat hy in twee breek. “Lelike skok vir die arme ou Barty, sou ek sê. Moes meer tyd by die huis saam met sy gesin deurgebring het, nê? Moes die kantoor so nou en dan vroeg verlaat het . . . sy eie seun leer ken het.”

Hy begin om groot hompe brood te verslind.

“Was sy seun 'n Doodseter?” vra Harry.

“Het nie 'n idee nie,” sê Sirius terwyl hy nog 'n stuk brood wegslaan. “Ek was self al in Azkaban toe hy ingebring is. Dit is meesal goed wat ek uitgevind het sedert ek uit is. Die seun is definitief betrap in die geselskap van mense wat ek met my lewe sal wed Doodseters was – maar hy kon net sowel op die verkeerde plek op die verkeerde tyd gewees het, net soos daardie huiself.”

“Het Crouch probeer om sy seun los te kry?” fluister Hermien.

Sirius uiter 'n laggie wat meer soos 'n blaf klink. “Crouch sy seun loskry? Ek dag jy het hom opgesom, Hermien? Enigiets wat die moontlikheid het om sy reputasie aan te tas, moes uit. Hy het sy hele lewe daar-aan gewy om Minister vir Towerkuns te word. Jy het gesien hoe hy 'n toegewyde huiself ontslaan omdat sy hom weer met die Donker Merk

verbind het – sê dit nie vir jou hoe hy is nie? Crouch se vaderlike toewyding was net genoeg om vir sy seun 'n verhoor te bewerkstellig en volgens alle verslae was dit niks meer as 'n verskoning vir Crouch om te wys hoe hy die seun haat nie . . . Hy het hom daarna reguit Azkaban toe gestuur.”

“Hy het sy eie seun vir die Dementors gegee?” vra Harry sag.

“Dis reg,” sê Sirius en nou lyk hy nie in die minste geamuseer nie. “Ek het gesien toe die Dementors hom inbring; het deur die tralies voor my sel se deur gekyk. Hy was nie 'n dag ouer as negentien nie. Hulle het hom in 'n sel naby myne gesit. Teen die aand het hy skreeuend na sy ma geroep. Na 'n paar dae het hy stil geword . . . hulle word almal uiteindelik stil . . . behalwe wanneer hulle in hul slaap skree . . .”

Vir 'n oomblik is die dooie blik in Sirius se oë merkbaarder as gewoonlik, asof luike agter hulle toegegaan het.

“Is hy nog steeds in Azkaban?” sê Harry.

“Nee,” sê Sirius dofweg. “Nee, hy's nie meer daar nie. Hy's dood, omtrent 'n jaar nadat hulle hom ingebring het.”

“Hy's *dood*?”

“Hy was nie die enigste een nie,” sê Sirius bitter. “Die meeste word mal daar binne en baie hou uiteindelik op met eet. Hulle verloor die wil om te leef. 'n Mens het altyd geweet wanneer die dood naby was, want die Dementors voel dit aan en raak opgewonde. Daardie seun het klaar sieklik gelyk toe hy daar aangekom het. Omdat Crouch 'n belangrike lid van die Ministerie is, is hy en sy vrou toegelaat om hom op sy sterfbed te besoek. Dit was die laaste keer dat ek vir Barty Crouch gesien het, toe hy sy vrou verby my sel gesleepdra het. Sy's ook skynbaar kort daarna dood. Verdriet. Weggekwyn soos die seun. Crouch het sy seun se liggaam nooit kom haal nie. Die Dementors het hom buite die vesting begrawe, ek het gesien toe hulle dit doen.”

Sirius gooi die brood wat hy so pas na sy mond gelig het eenkant toe, tel die fles pampoensap op en slaan dit weg.

“Ou Crouch het dus alles verloor net toe hy gedink het dat sy toekoms verseker is,” gaan hy voort terwyl hy sy mond met die agterkant van sy hand afvee. “Die een oomblik 'n held, op die punt om Minister vir Towerkuns te word . . . die volgende oomblik is sy seun dood, sy vrou dood, die familienaam onteer en het sy gewildheid, so het ek sedert my ontsnapping gehoor, geweldig afgeneem. Na die seun se dood het mense meer simpatiek teenoor hom begin voel en begin vra hoe 'n oulike jong kind uit 'n goeie familie die pad so lelik byster kon raak. Die gevolgtrekking was dat sy pa nooit juis vir hom omgee het nie. Gevolglik het Cornelius Broddelwerk die toppos gekry en is Crouch sywaarts na die Departement vir Internasionale Magiese Samewerking geskuif.”

Daar is 'n lang stilte. Harry dink aan die manier waarop Crouch se oë

uitgepeul het toe hy daar in die woud by die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker na die ongehoorsame elf gekyk het. Dis dan waarom Crouch so oorreageer het toe Knipogies onder die Donker Merk gevind is. Dit het herinnerings aan sy seun opgediep en aan die ou skandaal en hoe hy by die Ministerie in onguns verval het.

“Moodie sê Crouch is behep met die vang van Donker towenaars,” sê Harry vir Sirius.

“Ja, ek het gehoor dit het so ietwat van ’n manie by hom geword,” sê Sirius en hy knik sy kop. “As jy my vra, dink hy nog steeds dat hy sy ou gewildheid kan terugwen deur nog ’n Doodseter vas te trek.”

“En hy het stilletjies hierheen gekom om Snerp se kantoor te deursoek!” sê Ron terwyl hy triomfantlik na Hermien kyk.

“Ja, en dit maak glad nie sin nie,” sê Sirius.

“Ja, dit maak!” sê Ron opgewonde.

Sirius skud egter sy kop. “Luister, as Crouch vir Snerp wil ondersoek, hoekom kom hy nie by die Toernooi beoordeel nie? Dit sal hom die ideale geleentheid bied om Hogwarts gereeld te besoek en ’n ogie oor Snerp te hou.”

“Dan dink jy dat Snerp iets in die mou voer?” vra Harry, maar Hermien val hom in die rede.

“Luister, dit traak my nie wat julle sê nie, Dompeldorius vertrou vir Snerp –”

“Ag, komaan, Hermien,” sê Ron ongeduldig, “ek weet Dompeldorius is briljant en alles, maar dit beteken nie dat ’n werklik slim toenaar hom nie kan bedrieg –”

“Hoekom het Snerp dan Harry se lewe in ons eerste jaar gered? Hoekom het hy hom nie net laat doodgaan nie?”

“Ek weet nie – dalk het hy gedink dat Dompeldorius hom sal uitkop –”

“Wat dink jy, Sirius?” sê Harry so hard dat Ron en Hermien ophou stry.

“Ek dink dat julle al twee ’n punt het,” sê Sirius wat ingedagte na Ron en Hermien kyk. “Sedert ek gehoor het dat Snerp hier skoolhou, het ek gewonder hoekom Dompeldorius hom aangestel het. Snerp is nog altyd gefassineer deur die Donker Kunste, hy was bekend daarvoor op skool. Slymerige, olierige ghriesbol,” voeg Sirius by en Harry en Ron grinnik vir mekaar. “Toe Snerp by die skool opgedaag het, het hy meer vloeke geken as die helfte van die kinders in hul sewende jaar; boonop was hy lid van ’n bende Slibberins wat amper almal later Doodseters geword het.”

Sirius hou sy vingers op en begin om name te noem. “Rosier en Wilkes – hulle is albei die jaar voor Woldemort se ondergang deur Aurors gedood. Die Lestranges – hulle was getroud – hulle’s in Azkaban. Avery – van wat ek gehoor het, het homself uit die pekel gewurm deur te sê dat hy deur die Imperiusvloek beheer is – hy’s nog op vrye voet. Maar sover

ek weet, was Snerp nooit eens daarvan beskuldig dat hy 'n Doodseter was nie – nie dat dit baie beteken nie. Baie van hulle is nooit gevang nie. En Snerp is beslis slim en uitgeslape genoeg om homself uit die moeilikheid te hou.”

“Snerp ken vir Karkaroff baie goed, maar hy probeer dit stil hou,” sê Ron.

“Ja, jy moes Snerp se gesig gesien het toe Karkaroff gister in die Tower-drankieklas opgedaag het!” sê Harry vinnig. “Karkaroff wou met Snerp praat, hy’t gesê dat Snerp hom vermy. Karkaroff het regtig bekommerd gelyk. Hy’t vir Snerp iets op sy arm gewys, maar ek kon nie sien wat dit is nie.”

“Hy’t vir Snerp iets op sy arm gewys?” sê Sirius wat nou heeltemal verwilderd lyk. Hy trek sy vingers afgetrokke deur sy vuil hare en haal dan weer sy skouers op. “Wel, ek het nie ’n idee wat dit beteken nie . . . maar as Karkaroff werklik bekommerd is en as hy na Snerp vir antwoorde gaan . . .”

Sirius staar na die grot se muur, dan trek hy sy gesig gefrustreerd op ’n plooi. “Daar’s ook nog die feit dat Dompeldorius vir Snerp vertrou en hoewel ek weet dat Dompeldorius sy vertrou plaas waar baie ander mense dit nie sal doen nie, kan ek net nie sien dat hy vir Snerp by Hogwarts sal laat skoolhou as hy voorheen vir Woldemort gewerk het nie.”

“Hoekom is Moodie en Crouch dan so gretig om in Snerp se kantoor te kom?” hou Ron koppig vol.

“Wel,” sê Sirius stadig, “ek sal nie verbaas wees as Maloog elke enkele onderwyser se kantoor deursoek het sedert hy by Hogwarts is nie. Ou Moodie neem sy Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste baie ernstig op. Ek reken daar’s niemand vir wie hy vertrou nie en na al die goed wat hy al beleef het, is dit seker nie verbasend nie. Maar ek sal dit van Moodie sê, hy het net doodgemaak as hy nie anders kon nie. Hy het waar moontlik altyd mense lewend ingebring. Hy was streng, maar hy het nooit tot die vlak van die Doodseters gedaal nie. Crouch, daarenteen . . . hy’s ’n perd van ’n ander kleur . . . is hy regtig siek? En as hy is, waarom doen hy die moeite om homself na Snerp se kantoor te sleep? En as hy nie is nie . . . waarmee konkel hy? Wat het hy by die Wêreldbeker gedoen wat so belangrik was dat hy nie na die boonste losie kon gaan nie? Wat doen hy nou wat veroorsaak dat hy nie die Toernooi kan beoordeel nie?”

Sirius verval in stilte terwyl hy nog steeds na die grot se muur staar. Bokbok is besig om op die rotsvloer rond te snuffel op soek na enige bene wat hy dalk gemis het.

Dan kyk Sirius uiteindelik op na Ron. “Jy sê jou broer is Crouch se persoonlike assistent? Is daar enige kans dat jy hom kan vra of hy onlangs vir Crouch gesien het?”

“Ek kan probeer,” sê Ron onseker. “Sal dit so moet doen dat Percy nie

agterkom dat ek dink dat Crouch met iets onwettigs deurmekaar is nie. Percy aanbid die man.”

“Jy kan ook dalk probeer uitvind of hulle enige verdere leidrade oor Bertha Jurgens het,” sê Sirius en hy wys na die tweede eksemplaar van die *Daaglikse Profeet*.

“Bagman het vir my gesê hulle’t niks,” sê Harry.

“Ja, hy word in die artikel aangehaal,” sê Sirius en hy knik na die koerant. “Spul bogpraatjies oor hoe sleg Bertha se geheue is. Wel, sy het dalk verander sedert ek haar laas gesien het, maar die Bertha wat ek geken het, was glad nie vergeetagtig nie – inteendeel. Sy was ’n bietjie dof, maar sy’t ’n uitstekende geheue vir skinderpraatjies gehad. Dit het haar altyd in die sop laat beland, sy’t nooit geweet wanneer om haar mond te hou nie. Ek kan sien dat sy ietwat van ’n las vir die Ministerie kan wees . . . dalk is dit hoekom Bagman vir so lank nie moeite wou doen om haar te soek nie . . .”

Sirius slaak ’n enorme sug en vryf oor sy oë. “Hoe laat is dit?”

“Dis halfvier,” sê Hermien.

“Dan moet julle terug skool toe gaan,” sê Sirius en hy kom orent. “Nou luister . . .” hy kyk veral deurdringend na Harry – “ek wil nie hê julle klomp moet uit die skool glip om my te kom sien nie, reg? Stuur notas na my toe. Ek wil nog steeds van alles weet wat enigsins vreemd is. Maar julle gaan nie sonder verlof uit Hogwarts nie. Dit sal die ideale geleentheid wees vir iemand om julle aan te val.”

“Niemand het my nog tot dusver probeer aanval nie, net ’n draak en ’n paar Grindeloë,” sê Harry.

Sirius gluur na hom. “Dit traak my nie . . . ek sal eers weer met gemak asemhaal wanneer hierdie Toernooi verby is en dis eers in Junie. En moenie vergeet nie, as julle klomp oor my praat, noem my Snuffels, oukei?”

Hy gee die leë servet en fles vir Harry aan en gaan streel dan vir Bok-bok. “Ek stap saam met julle tot net buite die dorp,” sê Sirius. “Wil kyk of ek nog ’n koerant kan vaslê.”

Voor hulle by die grot uitstap, transformeer hy in die groot swart hond en toe stap hulle saam met hom die berg af, oor die rotsagtige terrein en terug na die oorhek. Hier laat hy elkeen van hulle toe om sy kop te streel voor hy wegdraai en na die buitewyke van die dorpie laat vat.

Harry, Ron en Hermien loop terug Hogsmeade toe en van daar af na Hogwarts.

“Wonder of Percy al hierdie goed oor Crouch weet?” sê Ron toe hulle met die rypad langs na die kasteel stap. “Maar dalk gee hy nie om nie . . . dit veroorsaak dalk dat hy vir Crouch nog meer bewonder. Hm, Percy is mal oor reëls. Hy sal net sê dat Crouch geweier het om hulle ter wille van sy eie seun te oortree.”

“Percy sal nooit een van sy familie vir die Dementors gee nie,” sê Hermien kwaai.

“Ek is nie so seker nie,” sê Ron. “As hy dink dat ons in die pad van sy loopbaan staan . . . Percy is baie ambisieus, weet jy . . .”

Hulle stap met die kliptrappe op na die Ingangsportaal van waar heerlike geure vanuit die Groot Saal na hulle warrel. Dis tyd vir aandete.

“Arme ou Snuffels,” sê Ron en hy trek sy asem diep in. “Hy moet regtig baie vir jou omgee, Harry . . . dink net, om rotte te moet eet.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



THE MADNESS OF MR. CROUCH

Harry, Ron, and Hermione went up to the Owlery after breakfast on Sunday to send a letter to Percy, asking, as Sirius had suggested, whether he had seen Mr. Crouch lately. They used Hedwig, because it had been so long since she'd had a job. When they had watched her fly out of sight through the Owlery window, they proceeded down to the kitchen to give Dobby his new socks.

The house-elves gave them a very cheery welcome, bowing and curtsying and bustling around making tea again. Dobby was ecstatic about his present.

"Harry Potter is too good to Dobby!" he squeaked, wiping large tears out of his enormous eyes.

“You saved my life with that gillyweed, Dobby, you really did,” said Harry.

“No chance of more of those eclairs, is there?” said Ron, who was looking around at the beaming and bowing house-elves.

“You’ve just had breakfast!” said Hermione irritably, but a great silver platter of eclairs was already zooming toward them, supported by four elves.

“We should get some stuff to send up to Snuffles,” Harry muttered.

“Good idea,” said Ron. “Give Pig something to do. You couldn’t give us a bit of extra food, could you?” he said to the surrounding elves, and they bowed delightedly and hurried off to get some more.

“Dobby, where’s Winky?” said Hermione, who was looking around.

“Winky is over there by the fire, miss,” said Dobby quietly, his ears drooping slightly.

“Oh dear,” said Hermione as she spotted Winky.

Harry looked over at the fireplace too. Winky was sitting on the same stool as last time, but she had allowed herself to become so filthy that she was not immediately distinguishable from the smoke-blackened brick behind her. Her clothes were ragged and unwashed. She was clutching a bottle of butterbeer and swaying slightly on her stool, staring into the fire. As they watched her, she gave an enormous hiccup.

“Winky is getting through six bottles a day now,” Dobby whispered to Harry.

“Well, it’s not strong, that stuff,” Harry said.

But Dobby shook his head. “’Tis strong for a house-elf, sir,” he

said.

Winky hiccuped again. The elves who had brought the eclairs gave her disapproving looks as they returned to work.

“Winky is pining, Harry Potter,” Dobby whispered sadly. “Winky wants to go home. Winky still thinks Mr. Crouch is her master, sir, and nothing Dobby says will persuade her that Professor Dumbledore is her master now.”

“Hey, Winky,” said Harry, struck by a sudden inspiration, walking over to her, and bending down, “you don’t know what Mr. Crouch might be up to, do you? Because he’s stopped turning up to judge the Triwizard Tournament.”

Winky’s eyes flickered. Her enormous pupils focused on Harry. She swayed slightly again and then said, “M — Master is stopped — *hic* — coming?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, “we haven’t seen him since the first task. The *Daily Prophet*’s saying he’s ill.”

Winky swayed some more, staring blurrily at Harry.

“Master — *hic* — ill?”

Her bottom lip began to tremble.

“But we’re not sure if that’s true,” said Hermione quickly.

“Master is needing his — *hic* — Winky!” whimpered the elf. “Master cannot — *hic* — manage — *hic* — all by himself. . . .”

“Other people manage to do their own housework, you know, Winky,” Hermione said severely.

“Winky — *hic* — is not only — *hic* — doing housework for Mr. Crouch!” Winky squeaked indignantly, swaying worse than ever and slopping butterbeer down her already heavily stained blouse.

“Master is — *hic* — trusting Winky with — *hic* — the most important — *hic* — the most secret —”

“What?” said Harry.

But Winky shook her head very hard, spilling more butterbeer down herself.

“Winky keeps — *hic* — her master’s secrets,” she said mutinously, swaying very heavily now, frowning up at Harry with her eyes crossed. “You is — *hic* — nosing, you is.”

“Winky must not talk like that to Harry Potter!” said Dobby angrily. “Harry Potter is brave and noble and Harry Potter is not nosy!”

“He is nosing — *hic* — into my master’s — *hic* — private and secret — *hic* — Winky is a good house-elf — *hic* — Winky keeps her silence — *hic* — people trying to — *hic* — pry and poke — *hic* —”

Winky’s eyelids drooped and suddenly, without warning, she slid off her stool into the hearth, snoring loudly. The empty bottle of butterbeer rolled away across the stone-flagged floor. Half a dozen house-elves came hurrying forward, looking disgusted. One of them picked up the bottle; the others covered Winky with a large checked tablecloth and tucked the ends in neatly, hiding her from view.

“We is sorry you had to see that, sirs and miss!” squeaked a nearby elf, shaking his head and looking very ashamed. “We is hoping you will not judge us all by Winky, sirs and miss!”

“She’s unhappy!” said Hermione, exasperated. “Why don’t you try and cheer her up instead of covering her up?”

“Begging your pardon, miss,” said the house-elf, bowing deeply again, “but house-elves has no right to be unhappy when there is

work to be done and masters to be served.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake!” Hermione cried. “Listen to me, all of you! You’ve got just as much right as wizards to be unhappy! You’ve got the right to wages and holidays and proper clothes, you don’t have to do everything you’re told — look at Dobby!”

“Miss will please keep Dobby out of this,” Dobby mumbled, looking scared. The cheery smiles had vanished from the faces of the house-elves around the kitchen. They were suddenly looking at Hermione as though she were mad and dangerous.

“We has your extra food!” squeaked an elf at Harry’s elbow, and he shoved a large ham, a dozen cakes, and some fruit into Harry’s arms. “Good-bye!”

The house-elves crowded around Harry, Ron, and Hermione and began shunting them out of the kitchen, many little hands pushing in the smalls of their backs.

“Thank you for the socks, Harry Potter!” Dobby called miserably from the hearth, where he was standing next to the lumpy tablecloth that was Winky.

“You couldn’t keep your mouth shut, could you, Hermione?” said Ron angrily as the kitchen door slammed shut behind them. “They won’t want us visiting them now! We could’ve tried to get more stuff out of Winky about Crouch!”

“Oh as if you care about that!” scoffed Hermione. “You only like coming down here for the food!”

It was an irritable sort of day after that. Harry got so tired of Ron and Hermione sniping at each other over their homework in the common room that he took Sirius’s food up to the Owlery that

evening on his own.

Pigwidgeon was much too small to carry an entire ham up to the mountain by himself, so Harry enlisted the help of two school screech owls as well. When they had set off into the dusk, looking extremely odd carrying the large package between them, Harry leaned on the windowsill, looking out at the grounds, at the dark, rustling treetops of the Forbidden Forest, and the rippling sails of the Durmstrang ship. An eagle owl flew through the coil of smoke rising from Hagrid's chimney; it soared toward the castle, around the Owlery, and out of sight. Looking down, Harry saw Hagrid digging energetically in front of his cabin. Harry wondered what he was doing; it looked as though he were making a new vegetable patch. As he watched, Madame Maxime emerged from the Beauxbatons carriage and walked over to Hagrid. She appeared to be trying to engage him in conversation. Hagrid leaned upon his spade, but did not seem keen to prolong their talk, because Madame Maxime returned to the carriage shortly afterward.

Unwilling to go back to Gryffindor Tower and listen to Ron and Hermione snarling at each other, Harry watched Hagrid digging until the darkness swallowed him and the owls around Harry began to awake, swooshing past him into the night.

By breakfast the next day Ron's and Hermione's bad moods had burnt out, and to Harry's relief, Ron's dark predictions that the house-elves would send substandard food up to the Gryffindor table because Hermione had insulted them proved false; the bacon, eggs, and kippers were quite as good as usual.

When the post owls arrived, Hermione looked up eagerly; she

seemed to be expecting something.

“Percy won’t’ve had time to answer yet,” said Ron. “We only sent Hedwig yesterday.”

“No, it’s not that,” said Hermione. “I’ve taken out a subscription to the *Daily Prophet*. I’m getting sick of finding everything out from the Slytherins.”

“Good thinking!” said Harry, also looking up at the owls. “Hey, Hermione, I think you’re in luck —”

A gray owl was soaring down toward Hermione.

“It hasn’t got a newspaper, though,” she said, looking disappointed. “It’s —”

But to her bewilderment, the gray owl landed in front of her plate, closely followed by four barn owls, a brown owl, and a tawny.

“How many subscriptions did you take out?” said Harry, seizing Hermione’s goblet before it was knocked over by the cluster of owls, all of whom were jostling close to her, trying to deliver their own letter first.

“What on earth — ?” Hermione said, taking the letter from the gray owl, opening it, and starting to read. “Oh really!” she sputtered, going rather red.

“What’s up?” said Ron.

“It’s — oh how ridiculous —”

She thrust the letter at Harry, who saw that it was not handwritten, but composed from pasted letters that seemed to have been cut out of the *Daily Prophet*.

You are a WickEd giRL. HarRy PotTER desErves

BeTteR. GO back wherE you cAMe from mUGgle.

“They’re all like it!” said Hermione desperately, opening one letter after another. “*‘Harry Potter can do much better than the likes of you. . . .’ ‘You deserve to be boiled in frog spawn. . . .’* Ouch!”

She had opened the last envelope, and yellowish-green liquid smelling strongly of petrol gushed over her hands, which began to erupt in large yellow boils.

“Undiluted bubotuber pus!” said Ron, picking up the envelope gingerly and sniffing it.

“Ow!” said Hermione, tears starting in her eyes as she tried to rub the pus off her hands with a napkin, but her fingers were now so thickly covered in painful sores that it looked as though she were wearing a pair of thick, knobbly gloves.

“You’d better get up to the hospital wing,” said Harry as the owls around Hermione took flight. “We’ll tell Professor Sprout where you’ve gone. . . .”

“I warned her!” said Ron as Hermione hurried out of the Great Hall, cradling her hands. “I warned her not to annoy Rita Skeeter! Look at this one . . .” He read out one of the letters Hermione had left behind: “*‘I read in Witch Weekly about how you are playing Harry Potter false and that boy has had enough hardship and I will be sending you a curse by next post as soon as I can find a big enough envelope.’* Blimey, she’d better watch out for herself.”

Hermione didn’t turn up for Herbology. As Harry and Ron left the greenhouse for their Care of Magical Creatures class, they saw

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle descending the stone steps of the castle. Pansy Parkinson was whispering and giggling behind them with her gang of Slytherin girls. Catching sight of Harry, Pansy called, “Potter, have you split up with your girlfriend? Why was she so upset at breakfast?”

Harry ignored her; he didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of knowing how much trouble the *Witch Weekly* article had caused.

Hagrid, who had told them last lesson that they had finished with unicorns, was waiting for them outside his cabin with a fresh supply of open crates at his feet. Harry’s heart sank at the sight of the crates — surely not another skrewt hatching? — but when he got near enough to see inside, he found himself looking at a number of fluffy black creatures with long snouts. Their front paws were curiously flat, like spades, and they were blinking up at the class, looking politely puzzled at all the attention.

“These’re nifflers,” said Hagrid, when the class had gathered around. “Yeh find ’em down mines mostly. They like sparkly stuff. . . . There yeh go, look.”

One of the nifflers had suddenly leapt up and attempted to bite Pansy Parkinson’s watch off her wrist. She shrieked and jumped backward.

“Useful little treasure detectors,” said Hagrid happily. “Thought we’d have some fun with ’em today. See over there?” He pointed at the large patch of freshly turned earth Harry had watched him digging from the Owlery window. “I’ve buried some gold coins. I’ve got a prize fer whoever picks the niffler that digs up most. Jus’ take off all yer valuables, an’ choose a niffler, an’ get ready ter set ’em loose.”

Harry took off his watch, which he was only wearing out of habit, as it didn't work anymore, and stuffed it into his pocket. Then he picked up a niffler. It put its long snout in Harry's ear and sniffed enthusiastically. It was really quite cuddly.

"Hang on," said Hagrid, looking down into the crate, "there's a spare niffler here . . . who's missin'? Where's Hermione?"

"She had to go to the hospital wing," said Ron.

"We'll explain later," Harry muttered; Pansy Parkinson was listening.

It was easily the most fun they had ever had in Care of Magical Creatures. The nifflers dived in and out of the patch of earth as though it were water, each scurrying back to the student who had released it and spitting gold into their hands. Ron's was particularly efficient; it had soon filled his lap with coins.

"Can you buy these as pets, Hagrid?" he asked excitedly as his niffler dived back into the soil, splattering his robes.

"Yer mum wouldn't be happy, Ron," said Hagrid, grinning. "They wreck houses, nifflers. I reckon they've nearly got the lot, now," he added, pacing around the patch of earth while the nifflers continued to dive. "I on'y buried a hundred coins. Oh there y'are, Hermione!"

Hermione was walking toward them across the lawn. Her hands were very heavily bandaged and she looked miserable. Pansy Parkinson was watching her beadily.

"Well, let's check how yeh've done!" said Hagrid. "Count yer coins! An' there's no point tryin' ter steal any, Goyle," he added, his beetle-black eyes narrowed. "It's leprechaun gold. Vanishes after a few hours."

Goyle emptied his pockets, looking extremely sulky. It turned out that Ron's niffler had been most successful, so Hagrid gave him an enormous slab of Honeydukes chocolate for a prize. The bell rang across the grounds for lunch; the rest of the class set off back to the castle, but Harry, Ron, and Hermione stayed behind to help Hagrid put the nifflers back in their boxes. Harry noticed Madame Maxime watching them out of her carriage window.

"What yeh done ter your hands, Hermione?" said Hagrid, looking concerned.

Hermione told him about the hate mail she had received that morning, and the envelope full of bubotuber pus.

"Aaah, don' worry," said Hagrid gently, looking down at her. "I got some o' those letters an' all, after Rita Skeeter wrote abou' me mum. *'Yeh're a monster an' yeh should be put down.'* *'Yer mother killed innocent people an' if you had any decency you'd jump in a lake.'*"

"No!" said Hermione, looking shocked.

"Yeah," said Hagrid, heaving the niffler crates over by his cabin wall. "They're jus' nutters, Hermione. Don' open 'em if yeh get any more. Chuck 'em straigh' in the fire."

"You missed a really good lesson," Harry told Hermione as they headed back toward the castle. "They're good, nifflers, aren't they, Ron?"

Ron, however, was frowning at the chocolate Hagrid had given him. He looked thoroughly put out about something.

"What's the matter?" said Harry. "Wrong flavor?"

"No," said Ron shortly. "Why didn't you tell me about the gold?"

“What gold?” said Harry.

“The gold I gave you at the Quidditch World Cup,” said Ron. “The leprechaun gold I gave you for my Omnioculars. In the Top Box. Why didn’t you tell me it disappeared?”

Harry had to think for a moment before he realized what Ron was talking about.

“Oh . . .” he said, the memory coming back to him at last. “I dunno . . . I never noticed it had gone. I was more worried about my wand, wasn’t I?”

They climbed the steps into the entrance hall and went into the Great Hall for lunch.

“Must be nice,” Ron said abruptly, when they had sat down and started serving themselves roast beef and Yorkshire puddings. “To have so much money you don’t notice if a pocketful of Galleons goes missing.”

“Listen, I had other stuff on my mind that night!” said Harry impatiently. “We all did, remember?”

“I didn’t know leprechaun gold vanishes,” Ron muttered. “I thought I was paying you back. You shouldn’t’ve given me that Chudley Cannon hat for Christmas.”

“Forget it, all right?” said Harry.

Ron speared a roast potato on the end of his fork, glaring at it. Then he said, “I hate being poor.”

Harry and Hermione looked at each other. Neither of them really knew what to say.

“It’s rubbish,” said Ron, still glaring down at his potato. “I don’t blame Fred and George for trying to make some extra money. Wish I

could. Wish I had a niffler.”

“Well, we know what to get you next Christmas,” said Hermione brightly. Then, when Ron continued to look gloomy, she said, “Come on, Ron, it could be worse. At least your fingers aren’t full of pus.” Hermione was having a lot of difficulty managing her knife and fork, her fingers were so stiff and swollen. “I *hate* that Skeeter woman!” she burst out savagely. “I’ll get her back for this if it’s the last thing I do!”

Hate mail continued to arrive for Hermione over the following week, and although she followed Hagrid’s advice and stopped opening it, several of her ill-wishers sent Howlers, which exploded at the Gryffindor table and shrieked insults at her for the whole Hall to hear. Even those people who didn’t read *Witch Weekly* knew all about the supposed Harry–Krum–Hermione triangle now. Harry was getting sick of telling people that Hermione wasn’t his girlfriend.

“It’ll die down, though,” he told Hermione, “if we just ignore it. . . . People got bored with that stuff she wrote about me last time ____”

“I want to know how she’s listening into private conversations when she’s supposed to be banned from the grounds!” said Hermione angrily.

Hermione hung back in their next Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson to ask Professor Moody something. The rest of the class was very eager to leave; Moody had given them such a rigorous test of hex-deflection that many of them were nursing small injuries. Harry had such a bad case of Twitchy Ears, he had to hold his hands

clamped over them as he walked away from the class.

“Well, Rita’s definitely not using an Invisibility Cloak!” Hermione panted five minutes later, catching up with Harry and Ron in the entrance hall and pulling Harry’s hand away from one of his wiggling ears so that he could hear her. “Moody says he didn’t see her anywhere near the judges’ table at the second task, or anywhere near the lake!”

“Hermione, is there any point in telling you to drop this?” said Ron.

“No!” said Hermione stubbornly. “I want to know how she heard me talking to Viktor! *And* how she found out about Hagrid’s mum!”

“Maybe she had you bugged,” said Harry.

“Bugged?” said Ron blankly. “What . . . put fleas on her or something?”

Harry started explaining about hidden microphones and recording equipment. Ron was fascinated, but Hermione interrupted them.

“Aren’t you two *ever* going to read *Hogwarts: A History*?”

“What’s the point?” said Ron. “You know it by heart, we can just ask you.”

“All those substitutes for magic Muggles use — electricity, computers, and radar, and all those things — they all go haywire around Hogwarts, there’s too much magic in the air. No, Rita’s using magic to eavesdrop, she must be. . . . If I could just find out what it is . . . ooh, if it’s illegal, I’ll have her . . .”

“Haven’t we got enough to worry about?” Ron asked her. “Do we have to start a vendetta against Rita Skeeter as well?”

“I’m not asking you to help!” Hermione snapped. “I’ll do it on my

own!”

She marched back up the marble staircase without a backward glance. Harry was quite sure she was going to the library.

“What’s the betting she comes back with a box of *I Hate Rita Skeeter* badges?” said Ron.

Hermione, however, did not ask Harry and Ron to help her pursue vengeance against Rita Skeeter, for which they were both grateful, because their workload was mounting ever higher in the days before the Easter holidays. Harry frankly marveled at the fact that Hermione could research magical methods of eavesdropping as well as everything else they had to do. He was working flat-out just to get through all their homework, though he made a point of sending regular food packages up to the cave in the mountain for Sirius; after last summer, Harry had not forgotten what it felt like to be continually hungry. He enclosed notes to Sirius, telling him that nothing out of the ordinary had happened, and that they were still waiting for an answer from Percy.

Hedwig didn’t return until the end of the Easter holidays. Percy’s letter was enclosed in a package of Easter eggs that Mrs. Weasley had sent. Both Harry’s and Ron’s were the size of dragon eggs and full of homemade toffee. Hermione’s, however, was smaller than a chicken egg. Her face fell when she saw it.

“Your mum doesn’t read *Witch Weekly*, by any chance, does she, Ron?” she asked quietly.

“Yeah,” said Ron, whose mouth was full of toffee. “Gets it for the recipes.”

Hermione looked sadly at her tiny egg.

“Don’t you want to see what Percy’s written?” Harry asked her hastily.

Percy’s letter was short and irritated.

As I am constantly telling the Daily Prophet, Mr. Crouch is taking a well-deserved break. He is sending in regular owls with instructions. No, I haven’t actually seen him, but I think I can be trusted to know my own superior’s handwriting. I have quite enough to do at the moment without trying to quash these ridiculous rumors. Please don’t bother me again unless it’s something important. Happy Easter.

The start of the summer term would normally have meant that Harry was training hard for the last Quidditch match of the season. This year, however, it was the third and final task in the Triwizard Tournament for which he needed to prepare, but he still didn’t know what he would have to do. Finally, in the last week of May, Professor McGonagall held him back in Transfiguration.

“You are to go down to the Quidditch field tonight at nine o’clock, Potter,” she told him. “Mr. Bagman will be there to tell the champions about the third task.”

So at half past eight that night, Harry left Ron and Hermione in Gryffindor Tower and went downstairs. As he crossed the entrance hall, Cedric came up from the Hufflepuff common room.

“What d’you reckon it’s going to be?” he asked Harry as they went together down the stone steps, out into the cloudy night. “Fleur keeps going on about underground tunnels; she reckons we’ve got to find

treasure.”

“That wouldn’t be too bad,” said Harry, thinking that he would simply ask Hagrid for a niffler to do the job for him.

They walked down the dark lawn to the Quidditch stadium, turned through a gap in the stands, and walked out onto the field.

“What’ve they done to it?” Cedric said indignantly, stopping dead.

The Quidditch field was no longer smooth and flat. It looked as though somebody had been building long, low walls all over it that twisted and crisscrossed in every direction.

“They’re hedges!” said Harry, bending to examine the nearest one.

“Hello there!” called a cheery voice.

Ludo Bagman was standing in the middle of the field with Krum and Fleur. Harry and Cedric made their way toward them, climbing over the hedges. Fleur beamed at Harry as he came nearer. Her attitude toward him had changed completely since he had saved her sister from the lake.

“Well, what d’you think?” said Bagman happily as Harry and Cedric climbed over the last hedge. “Growing nicely, aren’t they? Give them a month and Hagrid’ll have them twenty feet high. Don’t worry,” he added, grinning, spotting the less-than-happy expressions on Harry’s and Cedric’s faces, “you’ll have your Quidditch field back to normal once the task is over! Now, I imagine you can guess what we’re making here?”

No one spoke for a moment. Then —

“Maze,” grunted Krum.

“That’s right!” said Bagman. “A maze. The third task’s really very straightforward. The Triwizard Cup will be placed in the center of

the maze. The first champion to touch it will receive full marks.”

“We seemly ’ave to get through the maze?” said Fleur.

“There will be obstacles,” said Bagman happily, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “Hagrid is providing a number of creatures . . . then there will be spells that must be broken . . . all that sort of thing, you know. Now, the champions who are leading on points will get a head start into the maze.” Bagman grinned at Harry and Cedric. “Then Mr. Krum will enter . . . then Miss Delacour. But you’ll all be in with a fighting chance, depending how well you get past the obstacles. Should be fun, eh?”

Harry, who knew only too well the kind of creatures that Hagrid was likely to provide for an event like this, thought it was unlikely to be any fun at all. However, he nodded politely like the other champions.

“Very well . . . if you haven’t got any questions, we’ll go back up to the castle, shall we, it’s a bit chilly. . . .”

Bagman hurried alongside Harry as they began to wend their way out of the growing maze. Harry had the feeling that Bagman was going to start offering to help him again, but just then, Krum tapped Harry on the shoulder.

“Could I haff a vord?”

“Yeah, all right,” said Harry, slightly surprised.

“Vill you valk vith me?”

“Okay,” said Harry curiously.

Bagman looked slightly perturbed.

“I’ll wait for you, Harry, shall I?”

“No, it’s okay, Mr. Bagman,” said Harry, suppressing a smile, “I

think I can find the castle on my own, thanks.”

Harry and Krum left the stadium together, but Krum did not set a course for the Durmstrang ship. Instead, he walked toward the forest.

“What’re we going this way for?” said Harry as they passed Hagrid’s cabin and the illuminated Beauxbatons carriage.

“Don’t want to be overheard,” said Krum shortly.

When at last they had reached a quiet stretch of ground a short way from the Beauxbatons horses’ paddock, Krum stopped in the shade of the trees and turned to face Harry.

“I want to know,” he said, glowering, “what there is between you and Hermy-own-ninny.”

Harry, who from Krum’s secretive manner had expected something much more serious than this, stared up at Krum in amazement.

“Nothing,” he said. But Krum glowered at him, and Harry, somehow struck anew by how tall Krum was, elaborated. “We’re friends. She’s not my girlfriend and she never has been. It’s just that Skeeter woman making things up.”

“Hermy-own-ninny talks about you very often,” said Krum, looking suspiciously at Harry.

“Yeah,” said Harry, “because we’re *friends*.”

He couldn’t quite believe he was having this conversation with Viktor Krum, the famous International Quidditch player. It was as though the eighteen-year-old Krum thought he, Harry, was an equal — a real rival —

“You haff never . . . you haff not . . .”

“No,” said Harry very firmly.

Krum looked slightly happier. He stared at Harry for a few

seconds, then said, “You fly very vell. I vos votching at the first task.”

“Thanks,” said Harry, grinning broadly and suddenly feeling much taller himself. “I saw you at the Quidditch World Cup. The Wronski Feint, you really —”

But something moved behind Krum in the trees, and Harry, who had some experience of the sort of thing that lurked in the forest, instinctively grabbed Krum’s arm and pulled him around.

“Vot is it?”

Harry shook his head, staring at the place where he’d seen movement. He slipped his hand inside his robes, reaching for his wand.

Suddenly a man staggered out from behind a tall oak. For a moment, Harry didn’t recognize him . . . then he realized it was Mr. Crouch.

He looked as though he had been traveling for days. The knees of his robes were ripped and bloody, his face scratched; he was unshaven and gray with exhaustion. His neat hair and mustache were both in need of a wash and a trim. His strange appearance, however, was nothing to the way he was behaving. Muttering and gesticulating, Mr. Crouch appeared to be talking to someone that he alone could see. He reminded Harry vividly of an old tramp he had seen once when out shopping with the Dursleys. That man too had been conversing wildly with thin air; Aunt Petunia had seized Dudley’s hand and pulled him across the road to avoid him; Uncle Vernon had then treated the family to a long rant about what he would like to do with beggars and vagrants.

“Vosn’t he a judge?” said Krum, staring at Mr. Crouch. “Isn’t he with your Ministry?”

Harry nodded, hesitated for a moment, then walked slowly toward Mr. Crouch, who did not look at him, but continued to talk to a nearby tree.

“. . . and when you’ve done that, Weatherby, send an owl to Dumbledore confirming the number of Durmstrang students who will be attending the tournament, Karkaroff has just sent word there will be twelve. . . .”

“Mr. Crouch?” said Harry cautiously.

“. . . and then send another owl to Madame Maxime, because she might want to up the number of students she’s bringing, now Karkaroff’s made it a round dozen . . . do that, Weatherby, will you? Will you? Will . . .”

Mr. Crouch’s eyes were bulging. He stood staring at the tree, muttering soundlessly at it. Then he staggered sideways and fell to his knees.

“Mr. Crouch?” Harry said loudly. “Are you all right?”

Crouch’s eyes were rolling in his head. Harry looked around at Krum, who had followed him into the trees, and was looking down at Crouch in alarm.

“Vot is wrong with him?”

“No idea,” Harry muttered. “Listen, you’d better go and get someone —”

“Dumbledore!” gasped Mr. Crouch. He reached out and seized a handful of Harry’s robes, dragging him closer, though his eyes were staring over Harry’s head. “I need . . . see . . . Dumbledore. . . .”

“Okay,” said Harry, “if you get up, Mr. Crouch, we can go up to the —”

“I’ve done . . . stupid . . . thing . . .” Mr. Crouch breathed. He looked utterly mad. His eyes were rolling and bulging, and a trickle of spittle was sliding down his chin. Every word he spoke seemed to cost him a terrible effort. “Must . . . tell . . . Dumbledore . . .”

“Get up, Mr. Crouch,” said Harry loudly and clearly. “Get up, I’ll take you to Dumbledore!”

Mr. Crouch’s eyes rolled forward onto Harry.

“Who . . . you?” he whispered.

“I’m a student at the school,” said Harry, looking around at Krum for some help, but Krum was hanging back, looking extremely nervous.

“You’re not . . . *his*?” whispered Crouch, his mouth sagging.

“No,” said Harry, without the faintest idea what Crouch was talking about.

“Dumbledore’s?”

“That’s right,” said Harry.

Crouch was pulling him closer; Harry tried to loosen Crouch’s grip on his robes, but it was too powerful.

“Warn . . . Dumbledore . . .”

“I’ll get Dumbledore if you let go of me,” said Harry. “Just let go, Mr. Crouch, and I’ll get him . . .”

“Thank you, Weatherby, and when you have done that, I would like a cup of tea. My wife and son will be arriving shortly, we are attending a concert tonight with Mr. and Mrs. Fudge.”

Crouch was now talking fluently to a tree again, and seemed completely unaware that Harry was there, which surprised Harry so much he didn't notice that Crouch had released him.

"Yes, my son has recently gained twelve O.W.L.s, most satisfactory, yes, thank you, yes, very proud indeed. Now, if you could bring me that memo from the Andorran Minister of Magic, I think I will have time to draft a response. . . ."

"You stay here with him!" Harry said to Krum. "I'll get Dumbledore, I'll be quicker, I know where his office is —"

"He is mad," said Krum doubtfully, staring down at Crouch, who was still gabbling to the tree, apparently convinced it was Percy.

"Just stay with him," said Harry, starting to get up, but his movement seemed to trigger another abrupt change in Mr. Crouch, who seized him hard around the knees and pulled Harry back to the ground.

"Don't . . . leave . . . me!" he whispered, his eyes bulging again. "I . . . escaped . . . must warn . . . must tell . . . see Dumbledore . . . my fault . . . all my fault . . . Bertha . . . dead . . . all my fault . . . my son . . . my fault . . . tell Dumbledore . . . Harry Potter . . . the Dark Lord . . . stronger . . . Harry Potter . . ."

"I'll get Dumbledore if you let me go, Mr. Crouch!" said Harry. He looked furiously around at Krum. "Help me, will you?"

Looking extremely apprehensive, Krum moved forward and squatted down next to Mr. Crouch.

"Just keep him here," said Harry, pulling himself free of Mr. Crouch. "I'll be back with Dumbledore."

"Hurry, von't you?" Krum called after him as Harry sprinted away

from the forest and up through the dark grounds. They were deserted; Bagman, Cedric, and Fleur had disappeared. Harry tore up the stone steps, through the oak front doors, and off up the marble staircase, toward the second floor.

Five minutes later he was hurtling toward a stone gargoyle standing halfway along an empty corridor.

“Lem — lemon drop!” he panted at it.

This was the password to the hidden staircase to Dumbledore’s office — or at least, it had been two years ago. The password had evidently changed, however, for the stone gargoyle did not spring to life and jump aside, but stood frozen, glaring at Harry malevolently.

“Move!” Harry shouted at it. “C’mon!”

But nothing at Hogwarts had ever moved just because he shouted at it; he knew it was no good. He looked up and down the dark corridor. Perhaps Dumbledore was in the staffroom? He started running as fast as he could toward the staircase —

“POTTER!”

Harry skidded to a halt and looked around. Snape had just emerged from the hidden staircase behind the stone gargoyle. The wall was sliding shut behind him even as he beckoned Harry back toward him.

“What are you doing here, Potter?”

“I need to see Professor Dumbledore!” said Harry, running back up the corridor and skidding to a standstill in front of Snape instead. “It’s Mr. Crouch . . . he’s just turned up . . . he’s in the forest . . . he’s asking —”

“What is this rubbish?” said Snape, his black eyes glittering. “What are you talking about?”

“Mr. Crouch!” Harry shouted. “From the Ministry! He’s ill or something — he’s in the forest, he wants to see Dumbledore! Just give me the password up to —”

“The headmaster is busy, Potter,” said Snape, his thin mouth curling into an unpleasant smile.

“I’ve got to tell Dumbledore!” Harry yelled.

“Didn’t you hear me, Potter?”

Harry could tell Snape was thoroughly enjoying himself, denying Harry the thing he wanted when he was so panicky.

“Look,” said Harry angrily, “Crouch isn’t right — he’s — he’s out of his mind — he says he wants to warn —”

The stone wall behind Snape slid open. Dumbledore was standing there, wearing long green robes and a mildly curious expression. “Is there a problem?” he said, looking between Harry and Snape.

“Professor!” Harry said, sidestepping Snape before Snape could speak, “Mr. Crouch is here — he’s down in the forest, he wants to speak to you!”

Harry expected Dumbledore to ask questions, but to his relief, Dumbledore did nothing of the sort.

“Lead the way,” he said promptly, and he swept off along the corridor behind Harry, leaving Snape standing next to the gargoyle and looking twice as ugly.

“What did Mr. Crouch say, Harry?” said Dumbledore as they walked swiftly down the marble staircase.

“Said he wants to warn you . . . said he’s done something terrible . . . he mentioned his son . . . and Bertha Jorkins . . . and — and Voldemort . . . something about Voldemort getting stronger. . . .”

“Indeed,” said Dumbledore, and he quickened his pace as they hurried out into the pitch-darkness.

“He’s not acting normally,” Harry said, hurrying along beside Dumbledore. “He doesn’t seem to know where he is. He keeps talking like he thinks Percy Weasley’s there, and then he changes, and says he needs to see you. . . . I left him with Viktor Krum.”

“You did?” said Dumbledore sharply, and he began to take longer strides still, so that Harry was running to keep up. “Do you know if anybody else saw Mr. Crouch?”

“No,” said Harry. “Krum and I were talking, Mr. Bagman had just finished telling us about the third task, we stayed behind, and then we saw Mr. Crouch coming out of the forest —”

“Where are they?” said Dumbledore as the Beauxbatons carriage emerged from the darkness.

“Over here,” said Harry, moving in front of Dumbledore, leading the way through the trees. He couldn’t hear Crouch’s voice anymore, but he knew where he was going; it hadn’t been much past the Beauxbatons carriage . . . somewhere around here. . . .

“Viktor?” Harry shouted.

No one answered.

“They were here,” Harry said to Dumbledore. “They were definitely somewhere around here. . . .”

“*Lumos*,” Dumbledore said, lighting his wand and holding it up.

Its narrow beam traveled from black trunk to black trunk, illuminating the ground. And then it fell upon a pair of feet.

Harry and Dumbledore hurried forward. Krum was sprawled on the forest floor. He seemed to be unconscious. There was no sign at

all of Mr. Crouch. Dumbledore bent over Krum and gently lifted one of his eyelids.

“Stunned,” he said softly. His half-moon glasses glittered in the wandlight as he peered around at the surrounding trees.

“Should I go and get someone?” said Harry. “Madam Pomfrey?”

“No,” said Dumbledore swiftly. “Stay here.”

He raised his wand into the air and pointed it in the direction of Hagrid’s cabin. Harry saw something silvery dart out of it and streak away through the trees like a ghostly bird. Then Dumbledore bent over Krum again, pointed his wand at him, and muttered, “*Rennervate.*”

Krum opened his eyes. He looked dazed. When he saw Dumbledore, he tried to sit up, but Dumbledore put a hand on his shoulder and made him lie still.

“He attacked me!” Krum muttered, putting a hand up to his head. “The old madman attacked me! I vos looking around to see vare Potter had gone and he attacked from behind!”

“Lie still for a moment,” Dumbledore said.

The sound of thunderous footfalls reached them, and Hagrid came panting into sight with Fang at his heels. He was carrying his crossbow.

“Professor Dumbledore!” he said, his eyes widening. “Harry — what the — ?”

“Hagrid, I need you to fetch Professor Karkaroff,” said Dumbledore. “His student has been attacked. When you’ve done that, kindly alert Professor Moody —”

“No need, Dumbledore,” said a wheezy growl. “I’m here.”

Moody was limping toward them, leaning on his staff, his wand lit.

“Damn leg,” he said furiously. “Would’ve been here quicker . . . what’s happened? Snape said something about Crouch —”

“Crouch?” said Hagrid blankly.

“Karkaroff, please, Hagrid!” said Dumbledore sharply.

“Oh yeah . . . right y’are, Professor . . .” said Hagrid, and he turned and disappeared into the dark trees, Fang trotting after him.

“I don’t know where Barty Crouch is,” Dumbledore told Moody, “but it is essential that we find him.”

“I’m onto it,” growled Moody, and he raised his wand and limped off into the forest.

Neither Dumbledore nor Harry spoke again until they heard the unmistakable sounds of Hagrid and Fang returning. Karkaroff was hurrying along behind them. He was wearing his sleek silver furs, and he looked pale and agitated.

“What is this?” he cried when he saw Krum on the ground and Dumbledore and Harry beside him. “What’s going on?”

“I vos attacked!” said Krum, sitting up now and rubbing his head. “Mr. Crouch or votever his name —”

“Crouch attacked you? *Crouch* attacked you? The Triwizard judge?”

“Igor,” Dumbledore began, but Karkaroff had drawn himself up, clutching his furs around him, looking livid.

“Treachery!” he bellowed, pointing at Dumbledore. “It is a plot! You and your Ministry of Magic have lured me here under false pretenses, Dumbledore! This is not an equal competition! First you sneak Potter into the tournament, though he is underage! Now one of

your Ministry friends attempts to put *my* champion out of action! I smell double-dealing and corruption in this whole affair, and you, Dumbledore, you, with your talk of closer international Wizarding links, of rebuilding old ties, of forgetting old differences — here's what I think of *you*!”

Karkaroff spat onto the ground at Dumbledore's feet. In one swift movement, Hagrid seized the front of Karkaroff's furs, lifted him into the air, and slammed him against a nearby tree.

“Apologize!” Hagrid snarled as Karkaroff gasped for breath, Hagrid's massive fist at his throat, his feet dangling in midair.

“Hagrid, *no*!” Dumbledore shouted, his eyes flashing.

Hagrid removed the hand pinning Karkaroff to the tree, and Karkaroff slid all the way down the trunk and slumped in a huddle at its roots; a few twigs and leaves showered down upon his head.

“Kindly escort Harry back up to the castle, Hagrid,” said Dumbledore sharply.

Breathing heavily, Hagrid gave Karkaroff a glowering look.

“Maybe I'd better stay here, Headmaster. . . .”

“You will take Harry back to school, Hagrid,” Dumbledore repeated firmly. “Take him right up to Gryffindor Tower. And Harry — I want you to stay there. Anything you might want to do — any owls you might want to send — they can wait until morning, do you understand me?”

“Er — yes,” said Harry, staring at him. How had Dumbledore known that, at that very moment, he had been thinking about sending Pigwidgeon straight to Sirius, to tell him what had happened?

“I'll leave Fang with yeh, Headmaster,” Hagrid said, staring

menacingly at Karkaroff, who was still sprawled at the foot of the tree, tangled in furs and tree roots. “Stay, Fang. C’mon, Harry.”

They marched in silence past the Beauxbatons carriage and up toward the castle.

“How dare he,” Hagrid growled as they strode past the lake. “How dare he accuse Dumbledore. Like Dumbledore’d do anythin’ like that. Like Dumbledore wanted *you* in the tournament in the firs’ place. Worried! I dunno when I seen Dumbledore more worried than he’s bin lately. An’ you!” Hagrid suddenly said angrily to Harry, who looked up at him, taken aback. “What were yeh doin’, wanderin’ off with ruddy Krum? He’s from Durmstrang, Harry! Coulda jinxed yeh right there, couldn’ he? Hasn’ Moody taught yeh nothin’? ’Magine lettin’ him lure yeh off on yer own —”

“Krum’s all right!” said Harry as they climbed the steps into the entrance hall. “He wasn’t trying to jinx me, he just wanted to talk about Hermione —”

“I’ll be havin’ a few words with her, an’ all,” said Hagrid grimly, stomping up the stairs. “The less you lot ’ave ter do with these foreigners, the happier yeh’ll be. Yeh can’ trust any of ’em.”

“You were getting on all right with Madame Maxime,” Harry said, annoyed.

“Don’ you talk ter me abou’ her!” said Hagrid, and he looked quite frightening for a moment. “I’ve got her number now! Tryin’ ter get back in me good books, tryin’ ter get me ter tell her what’s comin’ in the third task. Ha! You can’ trust any of ’em!”

Hagrid was in such a bad mood, Harry was quite glad to say good-bye to him in front of the Fat Lady. He clambered through the portrait

hole into the common room and hurried straight for the corner where Ron and Hermione were sitting, to tell them what had happened.

Die Waansin van Mnr. Crouch

Daardie Sondag na ontbyt gaan Harry, Ron en Hermien na die Uilhuis om, soos Sirius voorgestel het, vir Percy 'n brief te stuur waarin hulle vra of hy mnr. Crouch onlangs gesien het. Hulle gebruik vir Hedwig omdat sy lanklaas 'n werkie gedoen het. Hulle kyk deur die Uilhuis se venster tot sy buite sig verdwyn en gaan daarna af na die kombuis om vir Dobbi sy nuwe sokkies te gaan gee.

Die huiselwe gee hulle 'n warm verwelkoming. Hulle buig en knieknik en dra tee aan. Dobbi is in ekstase oor sy geskenk.

"Harry Potter is te goed vir Dobbi!" piep hy terwyl hy groot trane uit sy enorme oë vee.

"Jy het my lewe gered met daardie Kieugras, Dobbi, jy het regtig," sê Harry.

"Hier's nie dalk nog van daardie éclairs nie, hè?" sê Ron wat na die stralende en buigende elwe staan en kyk.

"Jy het nou net ontbyt gehad!" sê Hermien geïrriteerd, maar 'n groot silwer bord vol éclairs is reeds op pad na hulle toe, gedra deur vier elwe.

"Ons moet iets kry om vir Snuffels te stuur," brom Harry.

"Goeie voorstel," sê Ron. "Iets vir Pig om te doen. Julle het nie dalk 'n bietjie ekstra kos nie, hè?" sê hy vir die omringende elwe en hulle buig ekstasies en skarrel haastig weg om nog kos te gaan haal.

"Dobbi, waar is Knipogies?" vra Hermien terwyl sy om haar kyk.

"Knipogies is daar anderkant by die vuurherd, juffrou," sê Dobbi gedemp en sy ore hang effens.

"O liewe," sê Hermien toe sy vir Knipogies sien.

Harry kyk ook na die vuurherd. Knipogies sit op dieselfde stoel as die vorige keer, maar sy is so vuil dat sy nie dadelik van die rookswart stene agter haar onderskei kan word nie. Haar klere is aan flarde en ongewas. Sy wieg effens op haar stoel terwyl sy, met 'n bottel Botterbier in die hand, in die vuur staar. Voor hul oë gee sy 'n enorme hik.

"Knipogies drink elke dag ses bottels," fluister Dobbi vir Harry.

"Wel, daardie goed is darem nie sterk nie," sê Harry.

Dobbi skud egter sy kop. “Dis sterk vir ’n huiself, meneer,” sê hy.

Weer hik Knipogies. Die elwe wat die éclairs gebring het, kyk afkeurend na haar en toe begin hulle weer werk.

“Knipogies kwyn weg, Harry Potter,” fluister Dobbi droewig. “Knipogies wil huis toe gaan. Knipogies dink dat mnr. Crouch nog steeds haar meester is, meneer, en niks wat Dobbi sê, kan haar oortuig dat professor Dompeldorius nou haar baas is nie.”

“Haai, Knipogies,” sê Harry wat skielik ’n blink idee gekry het. Hy stap tot by haar en buig af om met haar te kan praat, “Jy weet nie dalk waarmee mnr. Crouch besig is nie, hê? Hy daag nie meer op om die Drietowenaarstoernooi te beoordeel nie.”

Knipogies se oë flikker. Haar enorme pupille fokus op Harry. Sy slinger weer effens en dan sê sy, “M-meester kom nie – hik – meer nie?”

“Nee,” sê Harry, “ons het hom sedert die eerste taak nog nie weer gesien nie. Die *Daaglikse Profeet* sê dat hy siek is.”

Knipogies slinger nog erger en staar met wasige oë na Harry. “Meester – hik – is siek?”

Haar onderlip begin bewe.

“Ons is nie seker of dit waar is nie,” sê Hermien vinnig.

“Meester het sy – hik – Knipogies nodig!” kerm die elf. “Meester kan nie – hik – op sy eie klaarkom nie . . .”

“Ander mense doen hul eie huiswerk, weet jy, Knipogies,” sê Hermien kwaai.

“Knipogies – hik – doen nie net – hik – mnr. Crouch se huiswerk nie!” piep Knipogies verontwaardig terwyl sy nog erger slinger en Botterbier oor haar reeds erg gevlekte bloes mors. “Meester – hik – vertrou vir Knipogies met sy – hik – belangrikste – hik – en geheimste –”

“Wat?” sê Harry.

Knipogies skud haar kop egter so woes dat sy nog Botterbier op haarself uitstort.

“Knipogies bewaar meester se – hik – geheime,” sê sy rebels terwyl sy nou baie erg slinger en skeeloog vir Harry frons. “Jy is – hik – bemoeisiek, dis wat.”

“Knipogies moenie so met Harry Potter praat nie!” sê Dobbi kwaai. “Harry Potter is dapper en edel en Harry Potter is nie nuuskierig nie!”

“Hy is bemoeisiek met – hik – my meester se – hik – privaat sake en geheime – hik – Knipogies is ’n goeie huiself – hik – Knipogies kan haar mond hou – hik – as mense probeer – hik – om hul neuse in te steek – hik –” Knipogies se ooglede val toe en skielik, sonder enige waarskuwing, glip sy van haar stoel af en val voor die vuurherd waar sy hard lê en snork. Die lêe Botterbier bottel rol oor die geplaveide klipvloer.

’n Halfdosyn huiselwe wat gewalg lyk, kom haastig nader. Een van hulle tel die bottel op en die ander gooi vir Knipogies met ’n groot geruite

tafeldoek toe. Hulle steek die kante netjies in sodat sy heeltemal toe is.

“Ons is jammer dat julle dit moet gesien het, menere en juffrou!” piep ’n elf wat naby hulle staan terwyl hy sy kop skud en baie skaam lyk. “Ons hoop nie julle dink dat ons almal soos Knipogies is nie, menere en juffrou!”

“Sy’s ongelukkig!” sê Hermien moedeloos. “Hoekom probeer julle haar lewe nie eerder opvrolik as om haar toe te gooi nie?”

“Verskoon my, juffrou,” sê die elf wat nou weer diep buig, “maar huiselwe het nie die reg om ongelukkig te wees as daar werk is wat gedoen en meesters wat gedien moet word nie.”

“Genadetjie tog!” sê Hermien ergerlik. “Luister vir my, almal van julle! Julle het net soveel reg as die towenaars om ongelukkig te wees as julle wil! Julle het dieselfde reg op lone en vakansies en regte klere, julle hoef nie alles te doen wat vir julle gesê word nie – kyk vir Dobbi!”

“Juffrou moet asseblief vir Dobbi hier uithou,” mompel Dobbi en hy lyk benoud. Die vrolike glimlagte verdwyn van die huiselwe in die kombuis se gesigte af. Skielik kyk hulle na Hermien asof sy waansinnig en gevaarlik is.

“Hier’s die ekstra kos!” piep ’n elf by Harry se elmboog toe hy ’n groot ham, ’n dosyn koekies en ’n klomp vrugte in Harry se arms druk. “Tot siens!”

Die huiselwe drom om Harry, Ron en Hermien saam en begin om hulle met vele klein handjies wat in hul rûe druk by die kombuis uit te stoot.

“Dankie vir die sokkies, Harry Potter!” roep Dobbi mistroostig van die vuurherd af waar hy langs die bultende tafeldoek wat Knipogies is, staan.

“Jy kan ook nie jou mond hou nie, kan jy, Hermien?” sê Ron ergerlik toe die kombuisdeur agter hulle toeslaan. “Hulle sal nie wil hê dat ons weer moet kom kuier nie! Ons kon nog goed oor Crouch uit Knipogies probeer kry het!”

“O, asof dit nogal vir jou saak maak!” sê Hermien smalend. “Jy gaan net soontoe vir die kos!”

Hierna is dit ’n krapperige soort dag. Harry is so moeg vir Ron en Hermien se gedurige gekyf terwyl hulle hul huiswerk in die geselskamer doen dat hy Sirius se kos daardie aand op sy eie Uilhuis toe neem.

Pigwidgeon is te klein om die hele ham alleen teen die berg op te dra, dus kry Harry twee steenuile om hom te help. Toe hulle met die groot pakkie tussen hulle die skemerte invlieg, lyk hulle besonder snaaks. Harry leun oor die vensterbank en staar oor die terrein na die donker, rit-selende boomtoppe in die Verbode Woud en die rimpelende seile van Durmstrang se skip. ’n Ooruil vlieg deur die spiraal rook wat uit Hagrid se skoorsteen kronkel; dit seil na die kasteel, vlieg om die Uilhuis en verdwyn uit sig. Toe hy afkyk, sien Harry hoe Hagrid energiek voor sy hut staan en spit. Harry wonder waarmee hy besig is; dit lyk asof hy ’n nuwe

groentetuin aanlê. Terwyl hy staan en kyk, kom Madame Maxine uit die Beauxbatonskoets en stap na Hagrid toe. Dit lyk asof sy met hom probeer praat. Hagrid leun op sy graaf, maar dit lyk nie asof hy gretig is om lank te gesels nie, want Madame Maxine keer kort hierna terug na die koets.

Harry is nie lus om weer na die Griffindortoring te gaan waar hy moet luister hoe Ron en Hermien mekaar afjak nie. Hy staan dus en kyk hoe Hagrid spit tot die donkerkte hom ingesluk het en die uile om Harry begin wakker word en verby hom die nag in suis.

Die volgende dag met ontbyt is Ron en Hermien se slegte bui uitgewoed en tot Harry se verligting word Ron se donker voorspellings dat die huiselwe substandaard kos na die Griffindortafel gaan stuur omdat Hermien hulle beledig het, nie bewaarheid nie. Die spek, eiers en rookharings is so goed soos altyd.

Toe die posuile aankom, kyk Hermien gretig op; dit lyk asof sy verwag om iets te kry.

“Percy sal nie nou al geantwoord het nie,” sê Ron. “Ons het Hedwig eers gister gestuur.”

“Nee, dis nie dit nie,” sê Hermien. “Ek het op die *Daaglikse Profeet* ingeteken, ek is siek en sat daarvan om alles by die Slibberins te moet hoor.”

“Dis ’n goeie idee!” sê Harry wat nou ook na die uile kyk. “Haai, Hermien, ek dink daar is iets –”

’n Grys uil sweef op Hermien af.

“Dit het nie ’n koerant nie,” sê sy en sy lyk teleurgesteld. “Dis –”

Tot haar verstomming land die grys uil voor haar bord gevolg deur vier nonnetjiesuile, ’n bruin uil en ’n roofuil.

“Op hoeveel het jy ingeteken?” sê Harry en gryp Hermien se beker voor die klomp uile dit omskop. Hulle bondel om haar saam in ’n poging om hul briewe eerste vir haar te gee.

“Wat op aarde –?” sê Hermien toe sy die brief by die grys uil vat, oopmaak en dit begin lees. “O, nè!” sê sy hortend en sy word effens rooi.

“Wat’s aan die gang?” sê Ron.

“Dis – o, hoe belaglik –” Sy stoot die brief na Harry toe wat sien dat dit nie met die hand geskryf is nie, maar uit geplakte letters saamgestel is wat lyk asof hulle uit die *Daaglikse Profeet* geknip is.

Jy is 'n NarE meiSIEkind. Harry PoTter verDIen BETer. GaaN teRug nA WAAR jy VANDaan kom MoGGeL.

“Hulle is almal so!” sê Hermien wanhopig toe sy die een brief na die ander oopmaak. “Harry Potter kan baie beter doen as iemand soos jy . . .”
“Jy verdien om in paddaeiers gekook te word . . .” *Eina!*”

Toe sy die laaste koevert oopmaak, spuit 'n geelgroen vloeistof wat sterk na petrol ruik oor haar hande sodat groot geel swere op hulle uitbars.

“Onverdunde Buileknoletter!” sê Ron toe hy die koevert versigtig optel en daaraan ruik.

“Sjoe!” sê Hermien en die trane skiet na haar oë toe sy haar hande met 'n servet probeer afvee, maar haar vingers is reeds so vol pynlike sere dat dit lyk asof sy 'n paar dik, knopperige handskoene aanhet.

“Jy moet siekeboeg toe gaan,” sê Harry toe die uile om Hermien weggevlieg het, “ons sal vir professor Spruit sê waarheen jy is . . .”

“Ek het haar gewaarsku!” sê Ron toe Hermien uit die Saal skarrel met haar hande beskermend voor haar bors. “Ek het gesê sy moenie vir Rika Skinner kwaad maak nie! Kyk net hierdie een . . .” Hy lees uit een van die briewe wat Hermien agtergelaat het, “*Ek het in Heks en Haard gelees hoe jy vir Harry Potter verneuk en daardie seun het al swaar genoeg gehad en ek stuur vir jou 'n vloek met die volgende pos sodra ek 'n groot genoeg koevert kan kry.*” Genade, sy sal moet lig loop.”

Hermien daag nie vir Herbologie op nie. Toe Harry en Ron by die kweekhuis uitstap om na Versorging van Magiese Kreature te gaan, sien hulle Malfoy, Krabbe en Goliath by die kliptrappe voor die kasteel afstap. Pansy Parkinson en haar kliek Slibberinvriendinne loop fluisterend en giggelend agter hulle aan. Toe hulle vir Harry sien, roep Pansy, “Potter, het jy jou meisie afgesê? Hoekom was sy so ontsteld aan die ontbyttafel?”

Harry ignoreer haar; hy wil haar nie die bevrediging gee om te weet hoeveel moeilikheid die berig in *Heks en Haard* veroorsaak het nie.

Hagrid, wat die vorige keer vir hulle gesê het dat die lesse oor eenhorings vir eers klaar is, staan voor sy hut en wag met 'n nuwe voorraad oop kratte aan sy voete. Harry se hart sink toe hy die kratte sien – daar het darem seker nie nog Krewels uitgebroei nie? Toe hy egter naby genoeg is om binne-in te kan kyk, sien hy 'n aantal donsige swart dierrasies met lang snoete. Hul voorpote is vreemd plat, soos grawe, en hulle knipper hulle oë vir die klas terwyl hulle beleef dog verbaas oor al die aandag lyk.

“Dit is Niffers,” sê Hagrid toe die klas om hom staan. “'n Mens kry hulle meesal in myne en goed. Hulle hou van blink goed . . . daarso, kyk.”

Een van die Niffers het skielik opgespring en probeer nou om Pansy Parkinson se horlosie van haar gewrig af te byt. Sy los 'n kreet en spring agteruit.

“Baie nuttige klein skatgrawers,” sê Hagrid in sy noppies. “Gedink ons kan vandag 'n bietjie pret met hulle hê. Sien julle daar anderkant?” Hy wys na die groot strook vars omgewerkte grond wat Harry hom van die Uilhuis af sien omspit het. “Ek het 'n klomp goue munte daar begrawe. Daar's ook 'n prys vir die een wie se Niffer die meeste munte opgrawe.

Haal net eers jul kosbaarheid af voor julle 'n Niffer kies, en maak dan reg om hom los te laat."

Harry haal sy horlosie af en steek dit in sy sak. Hy dra dit net uit gewoonte, want dit loop nie meer nie. Toe tel hy 'n Niffer op. Dit steek sy lang snoet in Harry se oor en snuif met oorgawe. Dit is eintlik regtig oulik.

"Wag eers," sê Hagrid toe hy weer in die krat kyk, "hier's een oor . . . wie's nie hier nie? Waar's Hermien?"

"Sy moes siekeboeg toe gaan," sê Ron.

"Ons sal later verduidelik," brom Harry, want Pansy Parkinson is die ene ore.

Soveel pret het hulle nog nooit tydens Versorging van Magiese Kreature gehad nie. Die Niffers duik in en uit die stuk grond asof dit water is. Dan skarrel hulle terug na die student wat hulle losgelaat het om goud in hul hande te spoeg. Ron s'n is veral doeltreffend; sy skoot is sommer gou vol goud.

"Kan 'n mens sulke troeteldiere koop, Hagrid?" sê hy opgewonde toe sy Niffer weer eens in die grond duik en sy kleed in die proses vol modder spat.

"Jou ma sal nie in haar skik wees nie, Ron," sê Hagrid grinnikend, "Niffers verwoes huise. Ek dink hulle het nou amper alles," voeg hy by toe hy om die stuk grond stap waar die Niffers nog steeds in en uit duik. "Ek het net 'n honderd munte begrawe. O, daar's jy, Hermien!"

Hermien kom oor die grasperk na hulle toe aangestap. Haar hande is in dik verbande toegewikkel en sy lyk mistroostig. Pansy Parkinson hou haar met kraalogies dop.

"Wel, kom ons kyk hoe julle gevaar het!" sê Hagrid. "Tel jul munte! En dit help nie om dit te probeer steel nie, Goliat," voeg hy by terwyl sy kewerswart oë vernou. "Dis aardmannetjiegoud. Verdwyn na 'n paar uur."

Goliat lyk besonder nors toe hy sy sakke leegmaak. Dit blyk dat Ron se Niffer die beste was, dus gee Hagrid vir hom 'n groot blok Honeydukes-sjokolade as prys. Dan weergalm die middageteklok oor die terrein. Die res van die klas loop terug kasteel toe terwyl Harry, Ron en Hermien agterbly om Hagrid te help om die Niffers terug in hul kratte te sit. Harry merk dat Madame Maxine deur haar koets se venster na hulle kyk.

"Wat het met jou hande gebeur, Hermien?" sê Hagrid en hy lyk bekommerd.

Hermien vertel hom van die haatpos wat sy daardie oggend gekry het en van die koevert vol Buile-etter.

"Aag, moet jou nie opwerk nie," sê Hagrid sag terwyl hy na haar kyk. "Ek het ook sulke briewe en goed gekry na wat Rika Skinner oor my ma geskryf het. 'Jy's 'n monster en moet uitgesit word.' 'Jou ma het onskul-

dige mense vermoor en as jy enige ordentlikheid het, sal jy gaan doppies blaas’.”

“Nee!” sê Hermien en sy lyk geskok.

“Ja,” sê Hagrid terwyl hy die Niffers se kratte na die kant van die hut dra. “Hulle is mal in die kop, Hermien. Moenie die goed oopmaak as jy nog kry nie. Smyt hulle dadelik in die vuur.”

“Jy’t ’n baie goeie les gemis,” vertel Harry vir Hermien toe hulle terug kasteel toe stap. “Hulle is goed, daardie Niffers, nê, Ron?”

Ron kyk egter fronsend na die sjokolade wat Hagrid vir hom gegee het. Hy lyk omgekrap oor iets.

“Wat’s fout?” sê Harry. “Verkeerde geur?”

“Nee,” sê Ron kortaf. “Hoekom het jy my nie van die goud gesê nie, Harry?”

“Watter goud?” sê Harry.

“Die goud wat ek tydens die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker vir jou gegee het,” sê Ron. “Die aardmannetjiegoud wat ek jou vir my Omnikyker gegee het. In die boonste losie. Hoekom het jy nie vir my gesê dat dit verdwyn het nie?”

Harry moet ’n oomblik dink voor hy weet waarvan Ron praat.

“O . . .” sê hy toe hy uiteindelik onthou. “Ek weet nie . . . het nie eintlik agtergekom dat dit weg is nie. Was meer bekommerd oor my towerstaf as ek reg onthou.”

Hulle klim die trappe voor die Ingangsportaal uit en gaan dan na die Groot Saal vir middagete.

“Moet lekker wees,” sê Ron skielik toe hulle sit en besig is om bief en Yorkshire-poeding op te skep, “om soveel goud te hê dat jy nie eens agterkom as ’n sak vol Galjoene wegraak nie.”

“Luister, ek het daardie aand ander goed gehad om aan te dink!” sê Harry ongeduldig. “Ons het almal, onthou?”

“Ek het nie geweet dat aardmannetjiegoud verdwyn nie,” mompel Ron. “Ek het gedink ek het jou terugbetaal. Jy moes nie daardie Chudley Cannon-hoed vir my vir Kersfees gegee het nie.”

“Vergeet daarvan, oukei?” sê Harry.

Ron staar na die gebraaide aartappel wat hy met sy vurk deurboor het. Toe sê hy, “Ek haat dit om arm te wees.”

Harry en Hermien kyk na mekaar. Hulle weet nie een wat om te sê nie.

“Dis goor,” sê Ron, wat nog steeds na sy aartappel kyk. “Ek kan regtig nie vir Fred en George blameer dat hulle ekstra geld probeer maak nie. Wens ek kon. Wens ek het ’n Niffer gehad.”

“Wel, nou weet ons wat om volgende Kersfees vir jou te gee,” sê Hermien opgewek. Toe Ron egter nog steeds bedruk lyk, sê sy, “Komaan, Ron, dit kan erger wees. Ten minste is jou vingers nie vol etter nie.” Hermien sukkel behoorlik met haar mes en vurk, so geswel en styf is haar

vingers. “Ek *haat* daardie Skinner-vroumens!” bars sy ergerlik uit. “Ek sal haar terugkry hiervoor, al is dit die laaste ding wat ek doen!”

Tydens die daaropvolgende week daag nog meer haatpos vir Hermien op, en hoewel sy Hagrid se raad volg en dit nie meer oopmaak nie, stuur etlike van hierdie kwaadgesindes vir haar Skellers wat aan die Griffindortafel ontplof en beledigings uitskree sodat die hele Saal dit kan hoor. Selfs diegene wat nie *Heks en Haard* lees nie, weet nou alles oor die sogenaamde Harry-Krum-Hermien-driehoek. Harry is siek en sat daarvan om vir mense te sê dat Hermien nie sy meisie is nie.

“Dit sal oorwaai,” sê hy vir Hermien, “ons moet dit net ignoreer . . . mense het laas verveeld geraak met die goed wat sy oor my geskryf het –”

“Wat ek wil weet, is hoe sy na privaat gesprekke kan luister as sy kamma nie op die terrein mag kom nie!” sê Hermien ergerlik.

Tydens hul volgende Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste-klas bly Hermien agter om iets vir professor Moodie te vra. Die res van die klas is gretig om te loop; Moodie het vir hulle so ’n strawwe toets in vloekafweering laat doen dat baie van hulle geringe beserings het om na om te sien. Harry het so ’n kwaai aanval van Wikkellore dat hy sy hande geklem oor sy ore hou toe hy uit die klas stap.

“Wel, Rika gebruik beslis nie ’n onsigbaarheidsmantel nie!” blaas Hermien toe sy Harry en Ron vyf minute later inhaal en Harry se hand van sy wikkellende ore afhaal sodat hy kan hoor wat sy sê. “Moodie sê sy was nie naby die beoordelaars se tafel tydens die tweede taak nie en ook nie naby die meer nie!”

“Hermien, gaan dit enigszins help om vir jou te sê jy moet dit los?” vra Ron.

“Nee!” sê Hermien koppig. “Ek wil weet hoe sy vir my en Krum hoor praat het! En hoe sy van Hagrid se ma uitgevind het!”

“Dalk het sy jou elektronies afgeluister,” sê Harry.

“Afgeluister?” sê Ron verdwaas. “Wat . . . goggas of iets op haar gesit?”

Harry begin om van versteekte mikrofone en meeluisterapparate te vertel.

Ron is gefassineer, maar Hermien val hulle in die rede. “Gaan julle twee nooit ’n *Geskiedenis van Hogwarts* lees nie?”

“Wat’s die punt?” sê Ron. “Jy ken dit uit jou kop uit, ons hoef net vir jou te vra.”

“Al daardie plaasvervangers vir towerkuns wat die Moggels gebruik – elektrisiteit en rekenaars en radar en sulke goed – kry alles kortsluitings by Hogwarts, daar’s te veel towerkuns in die lug. Nee, Rika gebruik toewermagte om mee af te luister, sy moet net . . . As ek net kan weet wat . . . oe, as dit darem onwettig moet wees, dan *het* ek haar . . .”

“Het ons nie genoeg om ons oor te bekommer nie?” vra Ron vir haar. “Wil jy nou nog met ’n wraakveldtog teen Rika Skinner ook begin?”

“Ek het nie vir jou gevra om my te help nie!” jak Hermien hom af. “Ek sal dit self doen!”

Sonder om terug te kyk, marsjeer sy met die marmertrappe op boontoe. Harry is daarvan oortuig dat sy biblioteek toe gaan.

“Ek wed jou sy gaan met ’n boks vol *Ek haat Rika Skinner*-knopies terugkom,” sê Ron.

Hermien vra egter nie vir Harry en Ron om haar met haar veldtog teen Rika Skinner te help nie. Hieroor is hulle albei baie dankbaar, want hul werkslading word al hoe groter hoe nader die Paasvakansie kom. Harry is verstom dat Hermien magiese meeluistermetodes kan navors tesame met al die ander goed wat hulle moet doen. Hy moet voluit werk om net al sy huiswerk klaar te kry, hoewel hy ’n punt daarvan maak om gereeld vir Sirius kospakkies na die spelonk te stuur. Na die vorige somer het hy nog nie vergeet hoe dit voel om gedurig honger te wees nie. Hy sluit briefies vir Sirius in waarin hy hom verseker dat niks buitengewoons gebeur het nie en ook dat hulle nog steeds op ’n antwoord van Percy wag.

Hedwig kom eers aan die einde van die Paasvakansie terug. Percy se brief is ingesluit by ’n pak Paaseiers wat van mev. Weasley af kom. Sowel Harry as Ron s’n is so groot soos draakeiers en vol tuisgemaakte toffie. Hermien s’n is egter kleiner as ’n hoendereier. Haar gesig val toe sy dit sien.

“Jou ma lees nie dalk *Heks en Haard* nie, hè, Ron?” vra sy gedemp.

“Ja,” sê Ron wie se mond vol toffie is. “Kry dit vir die resepte.”

Hermien staar bedremmeld na haar klein eiertjie.

“Wil jy dalk hoor wat Percy geskryf het?” vra Harry haastig.

Percy se brief is kort en geïrriteerd.

Soos ek voortdurend vir die Daaglikse Profeet sê, mnr. Crouch is besig om ’n welverdiende blaaskans te geniet. Hy stuur gereeld uile met instruksies. Nee, ek het hom nie persoonlik gesien nie, maar ek dink dat ek my eie baas se handskrif teen hierdie tyd behoort te ken. Ek het heeltemal genoeg om te doen sonder om hierdie belaglike gerugte te moet hanteer. Moet my asseblief nie weer lastig val tensy dit werklik belangrik is nie. Aangename Paasfees.

Die begin van die somerkwartaal beteken gewoonlik dat Harry hard vir die laaste Kwiddiek-wedstryd van die seisoen moet oefen. Vanjaar moet hy egter vir die derde en laaste taak van die Drietowenaarstoernooi voorberei, hoewel hy nog steeds nie weet wat op hom wag nie. Uiteindelik, in die laaste week van Mei, hou professor McGonagall hom na Transfigurasie terug.

“Jy moet vanaand om nege-uur na die Kwiddiekveld gaan, Potter,” sê sy vir hom. “Mnr. Bagman sal daar wees om met die kampioene oor die derde taak te praat.”

Daardie aand om halfnege los Harry vir Ron en Hermien in die Griffindortoring en gaan dan ondertoe. Net toe hy deur die Ingangsportaal stap, kom Cedric uit Hoesenproes se geselskamer.

“Wat dink jy gaan dit wees?” vra hy vir Harry toe hulle saam met die kliptrappe af die bewolkte nag instap. “Fleur gaan die hele tyd aan oor ondergrondse tunnels, sy dink ons moet ’n skat soek.”

“Dit sal nie te erg wees nie,” sê Harry wat dink dat hy net eenvoudig ’n Niffer by Hagrid sal leen om die werkjie vir hom te doen.

Hulle stap oor die donker grasperk na die Kwiddiekstadion, gaan deur ’n opening tussen die stellasies en stap op die speelveld.

“Wat gaan hier aan?” sê Cedric verontwaardig toe hy in sy spore tot stilstand kom.

Die Kwiddiekveld is nie meer glad en gelyk nie. Dit lyk asof iemand lang, lae mure kruis en dwars in alle rigtings daaroor gebou het.

“Dis heinings!” sê Harry toe hy afbuk om die een naaste aan hom te bekijk.

“Hallo daar!” roep ’n opgewekte stem.

Ludo Bagman staan in die middel van die speelveld by Fleur en Krum. Harry en Cedric moet oor die heinings klim om by hulle te kom. Toe Harry nader kom, glimlag Fleur stralend vir hom. Sedert hy haar suster uit die meer gered het, het haar houding teenoor hom soos handomkeer verander.

“Wel, en hoe lyk dit vir julle?” sê Bagman in sy skik toe Harry en Cedric oor die laaste heining geklouter het. “Groei mooi, nê? Nog ’n maand en Hagrid sal hulle tien meter hoog hê. Moenie bekommerd wees nie,” voeg hy grinnikend by toe hy die omgekrapte uitdrukkings op Harry en Cedric se gesigte sien, “jul Kwiddiekveld sal weer nes altyd lyk sodra die taak verby is! Nou, ek skat julle kan seker raai wat ons hier doen?”

Vir ’n oomblik sê niemand ’n woord nie. Dan –

“Doolhof,” grom Krum.

“Dis reg!” sê Bagman. “’n Doolhof. Die derde taak is regtig heeltemal eenvoudig. Die Drietowenaarstrofee sal in die middel van die doolhof staan. Die kampioen wat eerste daaraan raak, sal volpunte kry.”

“Ons moet net deur die doolhof loop?” vra Fleur.

“Daar sal hindernisse wees,” sê Bagman genoeglik terwyl hy op die balle van sy voete op en af bons. “Hagrid gaan ’n paar dierasies voorsien . . . en daar gaan towerspreuke wees om te breek . . . daardie soort ding, julle weet. Nou, die kampioene wat met punte voorloop, sal ’n voor-sprong kry.” Bagman grinnik vir Harry en Cedric. “Daarna sal mnr. Krum die doolhof binnegaan . . . en dan mej. Delacour. Julle sal egter almal ’n

billike kans hê; dit hang alles af van hoe goed julle daarin slaag om verby die hindernisse te kom. Klink na pret, nè?”

Harry, wat alte goed weet watter soort dierasies Hagrid na alle waarskynlikheid vir so 'n geleentheid sal voorsien, twyfel sterk of dit hoege-naamd pret gaan wees. Net soos die ander kampioene knik hy egter beleef.

“Goed dan . . . as daar geen vrae is nie, kan ons teruggaan kasteel toe. Dis 'n bietjie koud . . .”

Bagman stap haastig saam met Harry deur die groeiende doolhof buitentoe. Harry kry die gevoel dat Bagman op die punt is om weer eens sy hulp aan te bied, maar op daardie oomblik tik Krum vir Harry op die skouer.

“Kan ek met jou praat?”

“Ja, hoekom nie?” sê Harry effens verbaas.

“Sal jy saam met my stap?”

“Oukei,” sê Harry nuuskierig.

Bagman lyk ietwat bekaf. “Ek wag vir jou, Harry.”

“Nee, dis oukei, mnr. Bagman,” sê Harry en onderdruk 'n glimlag, “ek dink ek sal die kasteel op my eie kry, dankie.”

Harry en Krum loop saam van die speelveld af, maar Krum kies nie koers na die Durmstrang-skip nie. Hy stap na die Woud.

“Hoekom loop ons hierlangs?” vra Harry toe hulle verby Hagrid se hut en die verligte Beauxbatons-koets loop.

“Vhil nie hê iemand moet my hoor nie,” sê Krum kortaf.

Toe hulle uiteindelik by 'n afgeleë stuk grond kom, nie te ver van die Beauxbatons-perde se kamp nie, gaan Krum in die skaduwee van 'n boom staan en kyk na Harry.

“Ek vhil vheet,” sê hy glurend, “vhat daar tussen jou en Hermien is.”

Harry, wat te oordeel na Krum se geheimsinnige houding iets baie ergers verwag het, staar verbaas na Krum.

“Niks,” sê hy, maar Krum gluur nog steeds na hom en Harry, wat skielik opnuut besef hoe lank Krum is, verduidelik vinnig. “Ons is vriende. Sy's nie my meisie nie en sy was nog nooit nie. Dis net daardie Skinner-vroumens wat goeters opmaak.”

“Hermien praat baie van jou,” sê Krum en hy staar agterdogtig na Harry.

“Ja,” sê Harry, “omdat ons vriende is.”

Hy kan nie glo dat hy so 'n gesprek met Viktor Krum, die bekende internasionale Kwiddiekspeeler, het nie. Dis asof die agtienjarige Krum reken dat hy, Harry, 'n gelyke is – 'n ware teenstander –

“Julle het nog nooit . . . jy het nie . . .”

“Nee,” sê Harry baie beslis.

Krum lyk ietwat minder omgekrap. Vir nog 'n paar sekondes staar hy

na Harry en dan sê hy, “Jy vlieg baie goed. Ek het tydens die eerste taak gekyk.”

“Dankie,” sê Harry wat nou breed glimlag en skielik baie langer voel. “Ek het jou by die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker gesien. Daardie Wronski-fnuik, jy het regtig –”

Iets beweeg egter tussen die bome agter Krum en Harry, wat ondervinding het van die soort goed wat in die Woud skuil, gryp Krum instinktief aan die arm en trek hom weg.

“Vhat is dit?”

Harry skud sy kop terwyl hy na die plek staar waar hy die beweging gesien het. Hy steek sy hand onder sy kleed in en haal sy towerstaf uit.

Die volgende oomblik verskyn ’n man steierend van agter ’n groot eikeboom. Vir ’n oomblik herken Harry hom glad nie . . . dan besef hy dat dit mnr. Crouch is.

Hy lyk asof hy dae lank rondgereis het. Die knieë van sy kleed is geskeur en vol bloed; sy gesig is vol skrape; hy is ongeskeer en grys van afmatting. Sy hare en snor moet gewas en geknip word. Sy eienaardige verskyning is egter niks teen die manier waarop hy optree nie. Hy mompel en beduie en dit lyk asof hy met iemand praat wat net hy kan sien. Hy laat dink Harry aan ’n ou boemelaar wat hy eenkeer gesien het toe hy saam met die Dursleys gaan inkopies doen het. Daardie man het ook wildweg in die lug met homself gepraat; tant Petunia het Dudley se hand gegryp en hom oor die pad gesleep om van die man af weg te kom; oom Vernon het agterna in ’n lang tirade vir hulle vertel presies wat hy graag met alle bedelaars en leeglêers sal wil doen.

“Was hy nie ’n beoordelaar nie?” sê Krum terwyl hy na mnr. Crouch staar. “Is hy nie by julle Ministerie nie?”

Harry knik, aarsel ’n oomblik en stap dan stadig na mnr. Crouch wat nie na hom kyk nie, maar voortgaan om met die naaste boom te praat: “. . . en wanneer jy dit gedoen het, Weatherby, stuur ’n uil na Dompeldorius en bevestig hoeveel Durmstrang-studente die Toernooi sal bywoon, Karkaroff het laat weet dat daar twaalf . . .”

“Mnr. Crouch?” sê Harry versigtig.

“. . . en stuur nog ’n uil na Madame Maxine, want sy sal dalk meer studente wil bring noudat Karkaroff ’n volle dosyn het . . . doen dit, Weatherby, nè? Sal jy? Sal . . .” Mnr. Crouch se oë peul uit. Hy staar na die boom terwyl hy geluidloos mompel. Toe steier hy eenkant toe en val op sy knieë.

“Mnr. Crouch?” sê Harry hard. “Is u oukei?”

Crouch se oë rol in sy kop. Harry kyk om na Krum wat hom tussen die bome in gevolg het en nou geskok na Crouch staar.

“Vhat makeer hom?”

“Weet nie,” mompel Harry. “Luister, jy moet iemand gaan haal –”

“Dompeldorius!” snak mnr. Crouch. Hy steek sy hand uit, gryp Harry se kleed en trek homself daaraan nader terwyl hy oor Harry se kop staar. “Ek moet . . . sien . . . Dompeldorius . . .”

“Oukei,” sê Harry, “as jy net sal opstaan, mnr. Crouch, dan kan ons na die –”

“Ek het . . . dom ding . . . gedoen . . .” sê mnr. Crouch uitasem. Hy lyk heeltemal van sy sinne beroof. Sy oë rol en peul uit en ’n straaltjie speeksel drup oor sy ken. Dit lyk asof hy elke woord met groot moeite sê. “Moet vertel . . . Dompeldorius . . .”

“Staan op, mnr. Crouch,” sê Harry hard en duidelik. “Staan op, dan neem ek u na Dompeldorius toe!”

Mnr. Crouch se oë draai na Harry.

“Wie . . . jy?” fluister hy.

“Ek is ’n student by hierdie skool,” sê Harry wat na Krum kyk vir hulp, maar Krum staan terug en lyk erg op sy senuwees.

“Jy’s nie . . . syne nie?” fluister Crouch en sy mondhoeke hang.

“Nee,” sê Harry wat nie die vaagste benul het waarvan mnr. Crouch praat nie.

“Dompeldorius s’n?”

“Dis reg,” sê Harry.

Crouch sleep homself nog nader; Harry probeer om sy greep op sy kleed los te wikkell, maar hy klou te styf vas.

“Waarsku . . . Dompeldorius . . .”

“Ek sal vir Dompeldorius gaan haal as u my net sal los,” sê Harry. “Laat net los, mnr. Crouch, dan sal ek hom gaan haal . . .”

“Dankie, Weatherby, en wanneer jy dit gedoen het, sal ek graag ’n kopie tee wil hê. My vrou en seun sal binnekort opdaag, ons gaan vanaand saam met mnr. en mev. Broddelwerk na ’n konsert.” Nou praat Crouch weer vlot met ’n boom en hy lyk salig onbewus van Harry se teenwoordigheid, dat Harry so verbaas is dat hy nie agterkom dat Crouch hom laat los het nie. “Ja, my seun het onlangs twaalf UILE verwerf, werklik bevredigend, ja, dankie, dankie, ja, inderdaad baie trots. Nou kan jy daardie memo van die Andorraanse Minister vir Towerkuns vir my bring, ek dink ek het tyd om ’n antwoord –”

“Bly by hom!” sê Harry vir Krum. “Ek gaan vir Dompeldorius haal, ek sal gouer kan maak, ek weet waar sy kantoor is –”

“Hy is mal,” sê Krum onseker terwyl hy na Crouch staar wat nog steeds met die boom praat, oënskynlik onder die indruk dat dit Percy is.

“Bly net by hom,” sê Harry toe hy opstaan, maar hierdie beweging lei opnuut tot ’n verandering in mnr. Crouch. Hy gryp Harry om die knieë en trek hom terug grond toe.

“Moenie . . . weggaan nie . . .” fluister hy en sy oë peul weer uit. “Ek . . . ontsnap . . . moet waarsku . . . moet vertel . . . vir Dompeldorius sien

... my skuld ... alles my skuld ... Bertha ... dood ... alles my skuld
... my seun ... my skuld ... vir Dompeldorius sê ... Harry Potter ...
die Donker Heer ... sterker ... Harry Potter ...

“Ek sal vir Dompeldorius gaan haal sodra u my laat los, mnr. Crouch!”
sê Harry. Hy kyk vol woede om na Krum. “Gaan jy my nie help nie?”

Krum lyk baie lugtig toe hy nader staan en langs mnr. Crouch hurk.

“Sorg dat hy hier bly,” sê Harry toe hy homself uit mnr. Crouch se greep gewikkel het. “Ek kom dadelik terug met Dompeldorius.”

“Maak gou, oukei!” roep Krum agterna toe Harry van die Woud af oor die donker terrein nael. Alles is verlate. Bagman, Cedric en Fleur het verdwyn. Harry hardloop met die kliptrappe op, deur die eikehoutvoordeure en op met die marmertappe na die tweede verdieping.

Vyf minute later storm hy op die klipdrakekop af wat in die middel van 'n verlate gang staan.

“Suurlemoensorbet!” sê hy hygend.

Dit is die wagwoord na die geheime trappe wat na Dompeldorius se kantoor lei – of liewer, dit was, twee jaar gelede. Die wagwoord het duidelik verander, want die klipdrakekop word nie lewend nie en spring ook nie eenkant toe nie. Dit bly stokstyf staan terwyl dit boosaardig na Harry gluur.

“Beweeg!” gil Harry. “Komaan!”

Maar niks by Hogwarts het nog ooit beweeg bloot omdat iemand daarop skreeu nie; hy weet dis tevergeefs. Hy kyk op en af in die donker gang. Dalk is Dompeldorius in die personeelkamer? Hy begin om so vinnig as wat sy bene hom kan dra na die trappe te hardloop –

“POTTER!”

Harry gly tot stilstand en kyk om.

Snerp het so pas uit die verbode trap agter die klipdrakekop verskyn. Die muur is besig om agter hom toe te skuif toe hy Harry nader wink. “Wat maak jy hier, Potter?”

“Ek moet vir professor Dompeldorius sien!” sê Harry toe hy terughardloop en gly-gly in die gang voor Snerp tot stilstand kom. “Dis mnr. Crouch ... hy's hier ... hy's in die Woud ... hy vra –”

“Watse bog is dit?” sê Snerp en sy swart oë glinster. “Waarvan praat jy?”

“Mnr. Crouch!” skree Harry. “Van die Ministerie! Hy's siek of iets – hy's in die Woud en hy wil vir Dompeldorius sien! Gee vir my die wagwoord dat ek –”

“Die skoolhoof is besig, Potter,” sê Snerp en sy dun mond krul in 'n onplesierige glimlaggie.

“Ek moet vir Dompeldorius sê!” gil Harry.

“Het jy my nie gehoor nie, Potter?”

Harry kan sien dat Snerp dit gate uit geniet om hom in sy paniekbevange toestand die een ding wat hy wil hê, te weier.

“Luister,” sê Harry vererg, “Crouch is nie lekker nie – hy’s – hy’s van sy kop af – hy sê hy moet ’n waarskuwing –”

Die klipmuur agter Snerp gly oop. Dompeldorius staan daar in sy lang groen kleed en met ’n effens nuuskierige uitdrukking op sy gesig.

“Kan ek help?” vra hy terwyl hy nóg na Harry nóg na Snerp kyk.

“Professor!” sê Harry en systap vir Snerp voor Snerp iets kan sê. “Mnr. Crouch is hier – hy’s in die Woud, hy wil met u praat!”

Harry het verwag dat Dompeldorius vrae sal vra, maar tot sy verligting doen hy dit nie. “Wys my waar,” sê hy dadelik en swaai af in die lang gang agter Harry aan terwyl Snerp langs die drakekop bly staan en twee maal so boosaardig as gewoonlik lyk.

“Wat het mnr. Crouch gesê, Harry?” vra Dompeldorius toe hulle vinnig met die marmertrappe afstap.

“Hy’t gesê hy moet u waarsku . . . gesê hy’t iets vreesliks gedoen . . . hy’t oor sy seun gepraat . . . en oor Bertha Jurgens . . . en – en Woldemort . . . iets oor Woldemort wat sterker word . . .”

“Inderdaad,” sê Dompeldorius en hy loop nog vinniger toe hulle in die pikdonkerte kom.

“Hy tree nie normaal op nie,” sê Harry terwyl hy haastig langs Dompeldorius stap. “Dit lyk asof hy nie weet waar hy is nie. Hy hou aan praat asof Percy Weasley daar is en dan verander hy en sê hy moet u sien . . . ek het Viktor Krum by hom gelos.”

“Jy het?” sê Dompeldorius skerp en hy gee nog langer treë sodat Harry moet hardloop om by te hou. “Weet jy of enigiemand anders vir mnr. Crouch gesien het?”

“Nee,” sê Harry. “Ek en Krum het gesels nadat mnr. Bagman ons van die derde taak vertel het, ons het agtergeby en toe sien ons hoe mnr. Crouch uit die Woud kom –”

“Waar is hulle?” sê Dompeldorius toe Beauxbatons se koets in die donkerte verskyn.

“Hierdie kant toe,” sê Harry en tree voor Dompeldorius in om die pad deur die bome aan te wys. Hy kan Crouch se stem nie meer hoor nie, maar hy weet waar hy is; dit was nie ver anderkant die Beauxbatons-koets nie . . . hier iewers . . .

“Viktor?” roep Harry.

Niemand antwoord nie.

“Hulle was hier,” sê Harry vir Dompeldorius. “Hulle was beslis hier iewers . . .”

“Lumos,” sê Dompeldorius en hy hou sy verligte towerstaf in die lug.

Die dun ligstraal beweeg van swart boomstam na swart boomstam en verlig die grond. Dan val dit op ’n paar voete.

Harry en Dompeldorius gaan haastig nader. Krum lê uitgestrek op die grond. Dit lyk asof hy bewusteloos is. Daar is nie ’n teken van mnr.

Crouch nie. Dompeldorius buig oor Krum en lig een van sy ooglede versigtig op.

“Bedwelm,” sê hy sag. Sy halfmaanbrilglase glinster in die lig van die towerstaf toe hy na die omringende bome staan.

“Sal ek iemand gaan haal?” vra Harry. “Vir Madame Pomfrey?”

“Nee,” sê Dompeldorius vinnig. “Bly hier.”

Hy lig sy towerstaf en rig dit op Hagrid se hut. Harry sien hoe iets silwers uitdartel en soos ’n spookagtige voël deur die bome vlieg. Toe buig Dompeldorius oor Krum, rig die towerstaf op hom en prewel, “Ontwaak!”

Krum se oë gaan oop. Hy lyk verdwaas. Toe hy vir Dompeldorius sien, probeer hy regop kom, maar Dompeldorius sit sy hand op sy skouer en druk hom plat.

“Hy’t my aangeval!” prewel Krum en vat-vat met sy hand aan sy kop. “Die ou malle het my aangeval! Ek vhas besig om te kyk vhaar Potter bly en toe val hy my van agter af aan!”

“Lê vir ’n oomblik stil,” sê Dompeldorius.

Die geluid van donderende voetstappe kom nader en Hagrid verskyn blaas-blaas met Tande op sy hakke. Hy dra sy kruisboog.

“Professor Dompeldorius!” sê hy en sy oë rek. “Harry – wat de –?”

“Hagrid, jy moet asseblief vir professor Karkaroff gaan haal,” sê professor Dompeldorius. “Een van sy studente is aangeval. Wanneer jy daarmee klaar is, sal ek dit waardeer as jy vir professor Moodie in kennis sal stel –”

“Nie nodig nie, Dompeldorius,” sê ’n hees gromstem, “ek is hier.” Moodie kom na hulle toe aangehink. Hy leun op sy staf en sy towerstaf is verlig.

“Verbrande been,” sê hy ergerlik. “Sou al eerder hier gewees het . . . wat het gebeur? Snerp het iets oor Crouch gesê –”

“Crouch?” sê Hagrid verdwaas.

“Karkaroff, asseblief, Hagrid!” sê Dompeldorius skerp.

“O ja . . . seker, professor . . .” sê Hagrid en hy draai om en verdwyn tussen die donker bome terwyl Tande agter hom aandraf.

“Ek weet nie wat van Barty Crouch geword het nie,” sê Dompeldorius vir Moodie, “maar dit is van die uiterste belang dat ons hom vind.”

“Ek sal kyk,” grom Moodie en hy hou sy towerstaf gereed toe hy die Woud hinkend binnestap.

Nóg Dompeldorius nóg Harry sê ’n woord tot hulle die onmiskenbare geluide hoor wat Hagrid en Tande se terugkoms aankondig. Karkaroff kom haastig agter hulle aan. Hy dra sy gladde silwer pels en hy lyk opgewen en bleek.

“Wat gaan aan?” roep hy uit toe hy Krum op die grond sien lê met Dompeldorius en Harry langs hom. “Wat het gebeur?”

“Ek vhas aangeval!” sê Krum wat nou regop sit en sy kop vryf. “Mnr. Crouch of vhat sy naam ook al is –”

“Crouch het jou aangeval? *Crouch* het jou aangeval? Die Drietowenaarsbeoordelaar?”

“Igor,” begin Dompeldorius, maar Karkaroff lyk woedend toe hy homself tot sy volle lengte strek en sy pels bymekaar vat.

“Verraad!” bulder hy en wys na Dompeldorius. “Dit is ’n komplot! Jy en jou Minister vir Towerkuns het my onder valse voorwendsels hierheen gelok, Dompeldorius! Dis nie ’n gelyke kompetisie nie! Eers bewimpel jy dit dat Potter aan die Toernooi deelneem, hoewel hy heeltemal te jonk is! Nou probeer een van jou vriende by die Ministerie om *my* kampioen buite aksie te stel! Ek ruik ’n verneukery en ’n bedrogspul en jy, Dompeldorius, jy met jou praatjies oor nouer internasionale towenaarsbetrokkenheid, die herstel van bande en die vergeet van ou verskille – *dis* wat ek van jou dink!”

Karkaroff spoeg op die grond voor Dompeldorius se voete. In een vin-nige beweging gryp Hagrid vir Karkaroff voor aan sy pels en lig hom teen die naaste boom op.

“Vra verskoning!” snou Hagrid terwyl Karkaroff na asem snak. Hagrid se massiewe vuus is onder Karkaroff se keel en Karkaroff se voete swaai in die lug.

“Hagrid, *nee!*” skree Dompeldorius en sy oë blits.

Hagrid neem die hand waarmee hy Karkaroff teen die boom vaspen weg en Karkaroff gly die hele ent pad teen die stam af en stort in ’n bondel op die wortels neer; ’n paar takkies en blare val op sy kop.

“Neem asseblief vir Harry kasteel toe, Hagrid,” sê Dompeldorius skerp.

Hagrid haal swaar asem toe hy na Karkaroff gluur en sê, “Dalk moet ek eerder hier bly, meneer die skoolhoof . . .”

“Jy sal Harry terug skool toe neem, Hagrid,” herhaal Dompeldorius beslis. “Neem hom reguit na die Griffindortoring. En Harry – ek wil hê dat jy daar moet bly. Enigiets wat jy gedoen wil hê – enige uile wat jy wil stuur – kan tot môre wag, verstaan jy my?”

“H’m – ja,” sê Harry terwyl hy na Dompeldorius staar. Hoe het Dompeldorius geweet dat hy op hierdie presiese oomblik daaraan gedink het om vir Pigwidgeon reguit na Sirius te stuur om hom te vertel wat gebeur het?

“Ek los vir Tande by u, meneer die skoolhoof,” sê Hagrid wat nog steeds dreigend na Karkaroff gluur waar hy uitgestrek aan die voet van die boom lê, verknoop in sy pels en die boomwortels. “Bly, Tande. Kom, Harry.”

Hulle loop in stilte verby die Beauxbatons-koets en op na die kasteel.

“Hoe durf hy?” grom Hagrid toe hulle verby die meer stap. “Hoe durf

hy vir Dompeldorius beskuldig? Asof Dompeldorius so iets sal doen. Asof Dompeldorius wou hê dat jy aan die Toernooi moet deelneem. Bekommerd! Ek het Dompeldorius nog nooit meer bekommerd sien lyk as die laaste tyd nie. En jy!” sê Hagrid skielik ergerlik sodat Harry oorbluf na hom staar. “Wat dink jy waar loop jy saam met daardie verbrande Krum rond? Hy’s van Durmstrang, Harry! Kon jou net daar getoor het, weet jy dit? Het Moodie jou dan niks geleer nie? Dat jy jou sowaar so op jou eentjie laat weglok –”

“Krum is oukei!” sê Harry toe hulle die trappe voor die Ingangsportaal uitklim. “Hy’t nie probeer om my te toor nie, hy wou oor Hermien praat –”

“Ek sal met haar praat,” sê Hagrid grimmig terwyl hy met die trappe opstorm. “Hoe minder julle klomp met hierdie spul uitlanders uit te waai het, hoe beter. ’n Mens kan nie een van hulle vertrou nie.”

“Jy het heel goed met Madame Maxine oor die weg gekom,” sê Harry ergerlik.

“Moenie met my oor haar praat nie!” sê Hagrid en vir ’n oomblik lyk hy werklik vreesaanjaend. “Ek weet hoe haar kop werk! Probeer in my goeie boekies kom, probeer dat ek vir haar sê wat in die derde taak gaan gebeur. Ha! Jy kan nie een van hulle vertrou nie!”

Hagrid is in so ’n slegte bui dat Harry baie verlig is toe hy hom voor die Vet Vrou kan groet. Hy klouter deur die portretopening tot in die geselskamer en gaan reguit na die hoek waar Ron en Hermien sit om hulle alles wat gebeur het, te vertel.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



THE DREAM

It comes down to this,” said Hermione, rubbing her forehead. “Either Mr. Crouch attacked Viktor, or somebody else attacked both of them when Viktor wasn’t looking.”

“It must’ve been Crouch,” said Ron at once. “That’s why he was gone when Harry and Dumbledore got there. He’d done a runner.”

“I don’t think so,” said Harry, shaking his head. “He seemed really weak — I don’t reckon he was up to Disapparating or anything.”

“You *can’t* Disapparate on the Hogwarts grounds, haven’t I told you enough times?” said Hermione.

“Okay . . . how’s this for a theory,” said Ron excitedly. “Krum attacked Crouch — no, wait for it — and then Stunned himself!”

“And Mr. Crouch evaporated, did he?” said Hermione coldly.

“Oh yeah . . .”

It was daybreak. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had crept out of their dormitories very early and hurried up to the Owlery together to send a note to Sirius. Now they were standing looking out at the misty grounds. All three of them were puffy-eyed and pale because they had been talking late into the night about Mr. Crouch.

“Just go through it again, Harry,” said Hermione. “What did Mr. Crouch actually say?”

“I’ve told you, he wasn’t making much sense,” said Harry. “He said he wanted to warn Dumbledore about something. He definitely mentioned Bertha Jorkins, and he seemed to think she was dead. He kept saying stuff was his fault. . . . He mentioned his son.”

“Well, that *was* his fault,” said Hermione testily.

“He was out of his mind,” said Harry. “Half the time he seemed to think his wife and son were still alive, and he kept talking to Percy about work and giving him instructions.”

“And . . . remind me what he said about You-Know-Who?” said Ron tentatively.

“I’ve told you,” Harry repeated dully. “He said he’s getting stronger.”

There was a pause. Then Ron said in a falsely confident voice, “But he was out of his mind, like you said, so half of it was probably just raving. . . .”

“He was sanest when he was trying to talk about Voldemort,” said Harry, and Ron winced at the sound of the name. “He was having real trouble stringing two words together, but that was when he seemed to

know where he was, and know what he wanted to do. He just kept saying he had to see Dumbledore.”

Harry turned away from the window and stared up into the rafters. The many perches were half-empty; every now and then, another owl would swoop in through one of the windows, returning from its night’s hunting with a mouse in its beak.

“If Snape hadn’t held me up,” Harry said bitterly, “we might’ve got there in time. ‘The headmaster is busy, Potter . . . what’s this rubbish, Potter?’ Why couldn’t he have just got out of the way?”

“Maybe he didn’t want you to get there!” said Ron quickly. “Maybe — hang on — how fast d’you reckon he could’ve gotten down to the forest? D’you reckon he could’ve beaten you and Dumbledore there?”

“Not unless he can turn himself into a bat or something,” said Harry.

“Wouldn’t put it past him,” Ron muttered.

“We need to see Professor Moody,” said Hermione. “We need to find out whether he found Mr. Crouch.”

“If he had the Marauder’s Map on him, it would’ve been easy,” said Harry.

“Unless Crouch was already outside the grounds,” said Ron, “because it only shows up to the boundaries, doesn’t —”

“Shh!” said Hermione suddenly.

Somebody was climbing the steps up to the Owlery. Harry could hear two voices arguing, coming closer and closer.

“— that’s blackmail, that is, we could get into a lot of trouble for that —”

“— we’ve tried being polite; it’s time to play dirty, like him. He wouldn’t like the Ministry of Magic knowing what he did —”

“I’m telling you, if you put that in writing, it’s blackmail!”

“Yeah, and you won’t be complaining if we get a nice fat payoff, will you?”

The Owlery door banged open. Fred and George came over the threshold, then froze at the sight of Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

“What’re you doing here?” Ron and Fred said at the same time.

“Sending a letter,” said Harry and George in unison.

“What, at this time?” said Hermione and Fred.

Fred grinned.

“Fine — we won’t ask you what you’re doing, if you don’t ask us,” he said.

He was holding a sealed envelope in his hands. Harry glanced at it, but Fred, whether accidentally or on purpose, shifted his hand so that the name on it was covered.

“Well, don’t let us hold you up,” Fred said, making a mock bow and pointing at the door.

Ron didn’t move. “Who’re you blackmailing?” he said.

The grin vanished from Fred’s face. Harry saw George half glance at Fred, before smiling at Ron.

“Don’t be stupid, I was only joking,” he said easily.

“Didn’t sound like that,” said Ron.

Fred and George looked at each other. Then Fred said abruptly, “I’ve told you before, Ron, keep your nose out if you like it the shape it is. Can’t see why you would, but —”

“It’s my business if you’re blackmailing someone,” said Ron. “George’s right, you could end up in serious trouble for that.”

“Told you, I was joking,” said George. He walked over to Fred, pulled the letter out of his hands, and began attaching it to the leg of the nearest barn owl. “You’re starting to sound a bit like our dear older brother, you are, Ron. Carry on like this and you’ll be made a prefect.”

“No, I won’t!” said Ron hotly.

George carried the barn owl over to the window and it took off. George turned around and grinned at Ron.

“Well, stop telling people what to do then. See you later.”

He and Fred left the Owlery. Harry, Ron, and Hermione stared at one another.

“You don’t think they know something about all this, do you?” Hermione whispered. “About Crouch and everything?”

“No,” said Harry. “If it was something that serious, they’d tell someone. They’d tell Dumbledore.”

Ron, however, was looking uncomfortable.

“What’s the matter?” Hermione asked him.

“Well . . .” said Ron slowly, “I dunno if they would. They’re . . . they’re obsessed with making money lately, I noticed it when I was hanging around with them — when — you know —”

“We weren’t talking,” Harry finished the sentence for him. “Yeah, but blackmail . . .”

“It’s this joke shop idea they’ve got,” said Ron. “I thought they were only saying it to annoy Mum, but they really mean it, they want to start one. They’ve only got a year left at Hogwarts, they keep going

on about how it's time to think about their future, and Dad can't help them, and they need gold to get started."

Hermione was looking uncomfortable now.

"Yes, but . . . they wouldn't do anything against the law to get gold."

"Wouldn't they?" said Ron, looking skeptical. "I dunno . . . they don't exactly mind breaking rules, do they?"

"Yes, but this is the *law*," said Hermione, looking scared. "This isn't some silly school rule. . . . They'll get a lot more than detention for blackmail! Ron . . . maybe you'd better tell Percy. . . ."

"Are you mad?" said Ron. "Tell Percy? He'd probably do a Crouch and turn them in." He stared at the window through which Fred and George's owl had departed, then said, "Come on, let's get some breakfast."

"D'you think it's too early to go and see Professor Moody?" Hermione said as they went down the spiral staircase.

"Yes," said Harry. "He'd probably blast us through the door if we wake him at the crack of dawn; he'll think we're trying to attack him while he's asleep. Let's give it till break."

History of Magic had rarely gone so slowly. Harry kept checking Ron's watch, having finally discarded his own, but Ron's was moving so slowly he could have sworn it had stopped working too. All three of them were so tired they could happily have put their heads down on the desks and slept; even Hermione wasn't taking her usual notes, but was sitting with her head on her hand, gazing at Professor Binns with her eyes out of focus.

When the bell finally rang, they hurried out into the corridors

toward the Dark Arts classroom and found Professor Moody leaving it. He looked as tired as they felt. The eyelid of his normal eye was drooping, giving his face an even more lopsided appearance than usual.

“Professor Moody?” Harry called as they made their way toward him through the crowd.

“Hello, Potter,” growled Moody. His magical eye followed a couple of passing first years, who sped up, looking nervous; it rolled into the back of Moody’s head and watched them around the corner before he spoke again.

“Come in here.”

He stood back to let them into his empty classroom, limped in after them, and closed the door.

“Did you find him?” Harry asked without preamble. “Mr. Crouch?”

“No,” said Moody. He moved over to his desk, sat down, stretched out his wooden leg with a slight groan, and pulled out his hip flask.

“Did you use the map?” Harry said.

“Of course,” said Moody, taking a swig from his flask. “Took a leaf out of your book, Potter. Summoned it from my office into the forest. He wasn’t anywhere on there.”

“So he *did* Disapparate?” said Ron.

“*You can’t Disapparate on the grounds, Ron!*” said Hermione. “There are other ways he could have disappeared, aren’t there, Professor?”

Moody’s magical eye quivered as it rested on Hermione. “You’re another one who might think about a career as an Auror,” he told her.

“Mind works the right way, Granger.”

Hermione flushed pink with pleasure.

“Well, he wasn’t invisible,” said Harry. “The map shows invisible people. He must’ve left the grounds, then.”

“But under his own steam?” said Hermione eagerly, “or because someone made him?”

“Yeah, someone could’ve — could’ve pulled him onto a broom and flown off with him, couldn’t they?” said Ron quickly, looking hopefully at Moody as if he too wanted to be told he had the makings of an Auror.

“We can’t rule out kidnap,” growled Moody.

“So,” said Ron, “d’you reckon he’s somewhere in Hogsmeade?”

“Could be anywhere,” said Moody, shaking his head. “Only thing we know for sure is that he’s not here.”

He yawned widely, so that his scars stretched, and his lopsided mouth revealed a number of missing teeth. Then he said, “Now, Dumbledore’s told me you three fancy yourselves as investigators, but there’s nothing you can do for Crouch. The Ministry’ll be looking for him now, Dumbledore’s notified them. Potter, you just keep your mind on the third task.”

“What?” said Harry. “Oh yeah . . .”

He hadn’t given the maze a single thought since he’d left it with Krum the previous night.

“Should be right up your street, this one,” said Moody, looking up at Harry and scratching his scarred and stubbly chin. “From what Dumbledore’s said, you’ve managed to get through stuff like this plenty of times. Broke your way through a series of obstacles

guarding the Sorcerer's Stone in your first year, didn't you?"

"We helped," Ron said quickly. "Me and Hermione helped."

Moody grinned.

"Well, help him practice for this one, and I'll be very surprised if he doesn't win," said Moody. "In the meantime . . . constant vigilance, Potter. Constant vigilance." He took another long draw from his hip flask, and his magical eye swiveled onto the window. The topmost sail of the Durmstrang ship was visible through it.

"You two," counseled Moody, his normal eye on Ron and Hermione, "you stick close to Potter, all right? I'm keeping an eye on things, but all the same . . . you can never have too many eyes out."

Sirius sent their owl back the very next morning. It fluttered down beside Harry at the same moment that a tawny owl landed in front of Hermione, clutching a copy of the *Daily Prophet* in its beak. She took the newspaper, scanned the first few pages, said, "Ha! She hasn't got wind of Crouch!" then joined Ron and Harry in reading what Sirius had to say on the mysterious events of the night before last.

Harry — what do you think you are playing at, walking off into the forest with Viktor Krum? I want you to swear, by return owl, that you are not going to go walking with anyone else at night. There is somebody highly dangerous at Hogwarts. It is clear to me that they wanted to stop Crouch from seeing Dumbledore and you were probably feet away from them in the dark. You could have been killed.

Your name didn't get into the Goblet of Fire by

accident. If someone's trying to attack you, they're on their last chance. Stay close to Ron and Hermione, do not leave Gryffindor Tower after hours, and arm yourself for the third task. Practice Stunning and Disarming. A few hexes wouldn't go amiss either. There's nothing you can do about Crouch. Keep your head down and look after yourself. I'm waiting for your letter giving me your word you won't stray out-of-bounds again.

Sirius

“Who’s he, to lecture me about being out-of-bounds?” said Harry in mild indignation as he folded up Sirius’s letter and put it inside his robes. “After all the stuff he did at school!”

“He’s worried about you!” said Hermione sharply. “Just like Moody and Hagrid! So listen to them!”

“No one’s tried to attack me all year,” said Harry. “No one’s done anything to me at all —”

“Except put your name in the Goblet of Fire,” said Hermione. “And they must’ve done that for a reason, Harry. Snuffles is right. Maybe they’ve been biding their time. Maybe this is the task they’re going to get you.”

“Look,” said Harry impatiently, “let’s say Sirius is right, and someone Stunned Krum to kidnap Crouch. Well, they *would’ve* been in the trees near us, wouldn’t they? But they waited till I was out of the way until they acted, didn’t they? So it doesn’t look like I’m their target, does it?”

“They couldn’t have made it look like an accident if they’d

murdered you in the forest!” said Hermione. “But if you die during a task —”

“They didn’t care about attacking Krum, did they?” said Harry. “Why didn’t they just polish me off at the same time? They could’ve made it look like Krum and I had a duel or something.”

“Harry, I don’t understand it either,” said Hermione desperately. “I just know there are a lot of odd things going on, and I don’t like it. . . . Moody’s right — Sirius is right — you’ve got to get in training for the third task, straight away. And you make sure you write back to Sirius and promise him you’re not going to go sneaking off alone again.”

The Hogwarts grounds never looked more inviting than when Harry had to stay indoors. For the next few days he spent all of his free time either in the library with Hermione and Ron, looking up hexes, or else in empty classrooms, which they sneaked into to practice. Harry was concentrating on the Stunning Spell, which he had never used before. The trouble was that practicing it involved certain sacrifices on Ron’s and Hermione’s part.

“Can’t we kidnap Mrs. Norris?” Ron suggested on Monday lunchtime as he lay flat on his back in the middle of their Charms classroom, having just been Stunned and reawoken by Harry for the fifth time in a row. “Let’s Stun her for a bit. Or you could use Dobby, Harry, I bet he’d do anything to help you. I’m not complaining or anything” — he got gingerly to his feet, rubbing his backside — “but I’m aching all over. . . .”

“Well, you keep missing the cushions, don’t you!” said Hermione

impatiently, rearranging the pile of cushions they had used for the Banishing Spell, which Flitwick had left in a cabinet. “Just try and fall backward!”

“Once you’re Stunned, you can’t aim too well, Hermione!” said Ron angrily. “Why don’t you take a turn?”

“Well, I think Harry’s got it now, anyway,” said Hermione hastily. “And we don’t have to worry about Disarming, because he’s been able to do that for ages. . . . I think we ought to start on some of these hexes this evening.”

She looked down the list they had made in the library.

“I like the look of this one,” she said, “this Impediment Curse. Should slow down anything that’s trying to attack you, Harry. We’ll start with that one.”

The bell rang. They hastily shoved the cushions back into Flitwick’s cupboard and slipped out of the classroom.

“See you at dinner!” said Hermione, and she set off for Arithmancy, while Harry and Ron headed toward North Tower, and Divination. Broad strips of dazzling gold sunlight fell across the corridor from the high windows. The sky outside was so brightly blue it looked as though it had been enameled.

“It’s going to be boiling in Trelawney’s room, she never puts out that fire,” said Ron as they started up the staircase toward the silver ladder and the trapdoor.

He was quite right. The dimly lit room was swelteringly hot. The fumes from the perfumed fire were heavier than ever. Harry’s head swam as he made his way over to one of the curtained windows. While Professor Trelawney was looking the other way, disentangling

her shawl from a lamp, he opened it an inch or so and settled back in his chintz armchair, so that a soft breeze played across his face. It was extremely comfortable.

“My dears,” said Professor Trelawney, sitting down in her winged armchair in front of the class and peering around at them all with her strangely enlarged eyes, “we have almost finished our work on planetary divination. Today, however, will be an excellent opportunity to examine the effects of Mars, for he is placed most interestingly at the present time. If you will all look this way, I will dim the lights. . . .”

She waved her wand and the lamps went out. The fire was the only source of light now. Professor Trelawney bent down and lifted, from under her chair, a miniature model of the solar system, contained within a glass dome. It was a beautiful thing; each of the moons glimmered in place around the nine planets and the fiery sun, all of them hanging in thin air beneath the glass. Harry watched lazily as Professor Trelawney began to point out the fascinating angle Mars was making to Neptune. The heavily perfumed fumes washed over him, and the breeze from the window played across his face. He could hear an insect humming gently somewhere behind the curtain. His eyelids began to droop. . . .

He was riding on the back of an eagle owl, soaring through the clear blue sky toward an old, ivy-covered house set high on a hillside. Lower and lower they flew, the wind blowing pleasantly in Harry’s face, until they reached a dark and broken window in the upper story of the house and entered. Now they were flying along a gloomy passageway, to a room at the very end . . . through the door

they went, into a dark room whose windows were boarded up. . . .

Harry had left the owl's back . . . he was watching, now, as it fluttered across the room, into a chair with its back to him. . . . There were two dark shapes on the floor beside the chair . . . both of them were stirring. . . .

One was a huge snake . . . the other was a man . . . a short, balding man, a man with watery eyes and a pointed nose . . . he was wheezing and sobbing on the hearth rug. . . .

"You are in luck, Wormtail," said a cold, high-pitched voice from the depths of the chair in which the owl had landed. "You are very fortunate indeed. Your blunder has not ruined everything. He is dead."

"My Lord!" gasped the man on the floor. "My Lord, I am . . . I am so pleased . . . and so sorry. . . ."

"Nagini," said the cold voice, "you are out of luck. I will not be feeding Wormtail to you, after all . . . but never mind, never mind . . . there is still Harry Potter. . . ."

The snake hissed. Harry could see its tongue fluttering.

"Now, Wormtail," said the cold voice, "perhaps one more little reminder why I will not tolerate another blunder from you. . . ."

"My Lord . . . no . . . I beg you . . ."

The tip of a wand emerged from around the back of the chair. It was pointing at Wormtail.

"*Crucio!*" said the cold voice.

Wormtail screamed, screamed as though every nerve in his body were on fire, the screaming filled Harry's ears as the scar on his forehead seared with pain; he was yelling too. . . . Voldemort would

hear him, would know he was there. . . .

“Harry! *Harry!*”

Harry opened his eyes. He was lying on the floor of Professor Trelawney’s room with his hands over his face. His scar was still burning so badly that his eyes were watering. The pain had been real. The whole class was standing around him, and Ron was kneeling next to him, looking terrified.

“You all right?” he said.

“Of course he isn’t!” said Professor Trelawney, looking thoroughly excited. Her great eyes loomed over Harry, gazing at him. “What was it, Potter? A premonition? An apparition? What did you see?”

“Nothing,” Harry lied. He sat up. He could feel himself shaking. He couldn’t stop himself from looking around, into the shadows behind him; Voldemort’s voice had sounded so close. . . .

“You were clutching your scar!” said Professor Trelawney. “You were rolling on the floor, clutching your scar! Come now, Potter, I have experience in these matters!”

Harry looked up at her.

“I need to go to the hospital wing, I think,” he said. “Bad headache.”

“My dear, you were undoubtedly stimulated by the extraordinary clairvoyant vibrations of my room!” said Professor Trelawney. “If you leave now, you may lose the opportunity to see further than you have ever —”

“I don’t want to see anything except a headache cure,” said Harry. He stood up. The class backed away. They all looked unnerved.

“See you later,” Harry muttered to Ron, and he picked up his bag

and headed for the trapdoor, ignoring Professor Trelawney, who was wearing an expression of great frustration, as though she had just been denied a real treat.

When Harry reached the bottom of her stepladder, however, he did not set off for the hospital wing. He had no intention whatsoever of going there. Sirius had told him what to do if his scar hurt him again, and Harry was going to follow his advice: He was going straight to Dumbledore's office. He marched down the corridors, thinking about what he had seen in the dream . . . it had been as vivid as the one that had awoken him on Privet Drive. . . . He ran over the details in his mind, trying to make sure he could remember them. . . . He had heard Voldemort accusing Wormtail of making a blunder . . . but the owl had brought good news, the blunder had been repaired, somebody was dead . . . so Wormtail was not going to be fed to the snake . . . he, Harry, was going to be fed to it instead. . . .

Harry had walked right past the stone gargoyle guarding the entrance to Dumbledore's office without noticing. He blinked, looked around, realized what he had done, and retraced his steps, stopping in front of it. Then he remembered that he didn't know the password.

"Lemon drop?" he tried tentatively.

The gargoyle did not move.

"Okay," said Harry, staring at it, "Pear Drop. Er — Licorice Wand. Fizzing Whizbee. Drooble's Best Blowing Gum. Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans . . . oh no, he doesn't like them, does he? . . . oh just open, can't you?" he said angrily. "I really need to see him, it's urgent!"

The gargoyle remained immovable.

Harry kicked it, achieving nothing but an excruciating pain in his big toe.

“Chocolate Frog!” he yelled angrily, standing on one leg. “Sugar Quill! Cockroach Cluster!”

The gargoyle sprang to life and jumped aside. Harry blinked.

“Cockroach Cluster?” he said, amazed. “I was only joking. . . .”

He hurried through the gap in the walls and stepped onto the foot of a spiral stone staircase, which moved slowly upward as the doors closed behind him, taking him up to a polished oak door with a brass door knocker.

He could hear voices from inside the office. He stepped off the moving staircase and hesitated, listening.

“Dumbledore, I’m afraid I don’t see the connection, don’t see it at all!” It was the voice of the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge. “Ludo says Bertha’s perfectly capable of getting herself lost. I agree we would have expected to have found her by now, but all the same, we’ve no evidence of foul play, Dumbledore, none at all. As for her disappearance being linked with Barty Crouch’s!”

“And what do you think’s happened to Barty Crouch, Minister?” said Moody’s growling voice.

“I see two possibilities, Alastor,” said Fudge. “Either Crouch has finally cracked — more than likely, I’m sure you’ll agree, given his personal history — lost his mind, and gone wandering off somewhere —”

“He wandered extremely quickly, if that is the case, Cornelius,” said Dumbledore calmly.

“Or else — well . . .” Fudge sounded embarrassed. “Well, I’ll

reserve judgment until after I've seen the place where he was found, but you say it was just past the Beauxbatons carriage? Dumbledore, you know what that woman *is*?"

"I consider her to be a very able headmistress — and an excellent dancer," said Dumbledore quietly.

"Dumbledore, come!" said Fudge angrily. "Don't you think you might be prejudiced in her favor because of Hagrid? They don't all turn out harmless — if, indeed, you can call Hagrid harmless, with that monster fixation he's got —"

"I no more suspect Madame Maxime than Hagrid," said Dumbledore, just as calmly. "I think it possible that it is you who are prejudiced, Cornelius."

"Can we wrap up this discussion?" growled Moody.

"Yes, yes, let's go down to the grounds, then," said Fudge impatiently.

"No, it's not that," said Moody, "it's just that Potter wants a word with you, Dumbledore. He's just outside the door."

Die Droom

“Dit kom hierop neer,” sê Hermien en sy vryf haar voorkop, “óf mnr. Crouch het vir Viktor aangeval, óf iemand anders het albei van hulle aangeval toe Viktor nie gekyk het nie.”

“Dit moet Crouch gewees het,” sê Ron dadelik. “Dis hoekom hy weg was toe Harry en Dompeldorius daar aangekom het. Hy’t weggehol.”

“Ek dink nie so nie,” sê Harry en hy skud sy kop. “Hy het regtig sleg gelyk – ek dink nie hy sou kon Disappareer of iets nie.”

“’n Mens *kan* nie by Hogwarts Disappareer nie, hoeveel keer moet ek dit nog vir julle sê?” sê Hermien.

“Oukei . . . hoe klink dit vir ’n teorie,” sê Ron opgewonde, “Krum het vir Crouch aangeval – nee, wag, wag – en toe’t hy homself Bedwelms!”

“En mnr. Crouch het verdamp, hè?” sê Hermien koud.

“O ja . . .”

Dit is dagbreek. Harry, Ron en Hermien het vroeg uit hul slaapsale gesluip en haastig na die Uilhuis gegaan om vir Sirius ’n nota te stuur. Nou staan hulle oor die mistige terrein en kyk. Al drie van hulle se oë is dik en hulle is bleek in die gesig, want hulle het tot laat in die nag oor mnr. Crouch gesels.

“Vertel net gou weer, Harry,” sê Hermien. “Wat het mnr. Crouch nou eintlik alles gesê?”

“Ek sê mos, hy’t nie juis sin gemaak nie,” sê Harry. “Hy’t gesê hy moet vir Dompeldorius oor iets waarsku. Hy het beslis ook iets oor Bertha Jurgens gesê en dit het gelyk asof hy dink dat sy dood is. Hy’t aanhou sê dat goed sy skuld is . . . hy’t sy seun ook genoem.”

“Wel, dit was sy skuld,” sê Hermien ysig.

“Hy was van sy kop af,” sê Harry. “Die helfte van die tyd het dit gelyk of hy dink dat sy vrou en sy seun nog leef en hy’t aanmekaar met Percy oor werk gepraat en vir hom opdragte gegee.”

“Enne . . . wat het hy nou weer oor Jy-Weet-Wie gesê?” vra Ron huiwerig.

“Ek het mos gesê,” herhaal Harry bot. “Hy’t gesê dat hy sterker word.” Daar is ’n stilte.

Dan sê Ron in 'n stem vol valse vrouwe, "Maar hy was van sy kop af, jy't self so gesê, dus is die helfte daarvan waarskynlik net praatjies . . ."

"Hy was heeltemal helder toe hy oor Woldemort gepraat het," sê Harry en hy ignoreer die manier waarop Ron ineenkrimp. "Hy het regtig gesukkel om twee woorde na mekaar te sê, maar dan was dit weer asof hy weet waar hy is en wat hy wil doen. Hy't aanmekaar bly sê dat hy vir Dompeldorius moet sien."

Harry draai van die venster af weg en staar op na die dakbalke. Die helfte van die dwarsstokke is leeg; elke nou en dan kom 'n uil met 'n muiskin in die snawel na die nag se jagtog deur een van die vensters binne.

"As Snerp my nie opgehou het nie," sê Harry bitter, "was ons heel moontlik betyds daar. 'Die skoolhoof is besig, Potter . . . watter bog is dit, Potter?' Hoekom kon hy nie net padgegee het nie?"

"Dalk wou hy nie hê julle moet soontoe gaan nie!" sê Ron vinnig. "Dalk – wag 'n bietjie – hoe gou dink jy kon hy by die Woud kom? Dink jy hy kon voor jou en Dompeldorius daar gewees het?"

"Net as hy homself in 'n vlermuis of iets kan verander," sê Harry.

"Sal nie verbaas wees nie," brom Ron.

"Ons moet vir professor Moodie gaan sien," sê Hermien. "Ons moet uitvind of hy mnr. Crouch gekry het."

"As hy die Plunderaar se Kaart by hom gehad het, sou dit maklik gewees het," sê Harry.

"Tensy Crouch toe nie meer op die terrein was nie," sê Ron, "want dit wys net tot by die grense, of –"

"Sjji!" sê Hermien skielik.

Iemand is besig om die trappe na die Uilhuis uit te klim. Harry kan hoor hoe twee stemme wat stry al nader en nader kom.

"– dis afpersing, dis wat dit is, ons kan in die moeilikheid kom hieroor –"

"– ons het probeer om beleef te wees, dis tyd om vuil te speel, nes hy. Hy sal nie daarvan hou as die Ministerie vir Towerkuns moet weet wat hy doen nie –"

"Ek sê jou, as jy dit neerskryf, dan is dit afpersing!"

"Ja, en jy sal natuurlik kla as ons 'n lekker vet uitbetaling kry, nê?"

Die Uilhuis se deur klap oop. Fred en George kom oor die drumpel en steek vas toe hulle Harry, Ron en Hermien sien.

"Wat maak julle hier?" vra Ron en Fred tegelyk.

"Stuur 'n brief," sê Harry en George tegelyk.

"Wat, hierdie tyd van die dag?" sê Hermien en Fred.

Fred ginnik. "Goed – ons sal nie vir julle vra wat julle hier maak nie as julle nie vir ons vra nie," sê hy.

Hy hou 'n verseelde koevert in sy hand vas. Harry loer daarna, maar

Fred skuif sy hand sodat die naam toe is, en Harry is glad nie seker of dit per ongeluk of aspris was nie.

“Wel, moenie dat ons julle ophou nie,” sê Fred terwyl hy kamma buig en na die deur wys.

Ron roer nie. “Vir wie pers julle af?” vra hy.

Die grinnik verdwyn van Fred se gesig af. Harry sien hoe George so half na Fred loer voor hy vir Ron glimlag.

“Moenie simpel wees nie, ek het net ’n grap gemaak,” sê hy gemaklik.

“Het nie so geklink nie,” sê Ron.

Fred en George kyk na mekaar.

Dan sê Fred kortaf, “Ek het al vantevore vir jou gesê, Ron, dat jy jou neus uit ons sake moet hou as jy hou van hoe jou neus lyk. Kan nie eintlik verstaan hoekom nie, maar –”

“Dit is my saak as julle besig is om iemand af te pers,” sê Ron. “George is reg, julle kan diep in die moeilikheid kom.”

“Ek sê mos vir jou ek het net ’n grappie gemaak,” sê George. Hy stap na Fred, haal die brief uit sy hande en maak dit aan die naaste nonnetjiesuil se been vas. “Jy klink al nes ons geliefde ouer broer, Ron. Hou so aan, dan is jy een van die dae ’n prefek!”

“Nee, ek sal nie!” sê Ron ergerlik.

George dra die nonnetjiesuil na die venster en dit vlieg weg.

Hy draai om en grinnik vir Ron. “Wel, hou dan op om vir mense te sê wat hulle moet doen. Sien julle later.”

Hy en Fred stap by die Uilhuis uit. Harry, Ron en Hermien staar na mekaar.

“Dink julle hulle weet dalk iets oor alles?” fluister Hermien. “Oor Crouch en so aan?”

“Nee,” sê Harry. “As dit iets is wat so ernstig is, sal hulle vir iemand sê. Hulle sal vir Dompeldorius vertel.”

Ron lyk egter ongemaklik.

“Wat makeer?” vra Hermien.

“Wel . . .” sê Ron stadig, “ek weet nie of hulle sal nie. Hulle . . . hulle is deesdae behep met geldmaak, ek het dit agtergekom toe ek saam met hulle rondgehang het – toe – jy weet –”

“Ons nie gepraat het nie,” voltooi Harry die sin vir hom. “Ja, maar afpersing . . .”

“Dis hierdie grapwinkel-idee van hulle,” sê Ron. “Ek het gedink hulle sê dit net om Ma kwaad te maak, maar hulle bedoel dit regtig, hulle wil een begin. Hulle het nog net ’n jaar by Hogwarts oor en hulle hou aan oor hoe dit tyd is om aan hul toekoms te dink en hoe Pa hulle nie kan help nie en hoe hulle goud nodig het om ’n begin mee te maak.”

Nou lyk Hermien baie ongemaklik. “Ja, maar . . . hulle sal darem seker

nie iets doen wat teen die wet is om goud in die hande te kry nie. Of sal hulle?”

“Sal hulle?” sê Ron en hy lyk skepties. “Ek weet nie . . . hulle het nog nooit juis omgee om reëls te oortree nie.”

“Ja, maar dit is die wet,” sê Hermien en sy lyk bang. “Dis nie die een of ander simpel skoolreël nie . . . hulle sal baie meer as detensie vir afpersing kry! Ron . . . dalk moet jy tog vir Percy . . .”

“Is jy mal?” sê Ron. “Vir Percy sê? Netnou doen hy ’n Crouch en laat hulle arresteer.” Hy staar deur die venster waardeur Fred en George se uil verdwyn het en sê, “Komaan, kom ons gaan eet iets vir ontbyt.”

“Dink julle dis te vroeg om professor Moodie te gaan sien?” sê Hermien toe hulle met die wenteltrap afstap.

“Ja,” sê Harry. “Hy sal ons heel waarskynlik dwarsdeur die deur blaas as ons hom so vroeg wakker maak, hy sal dink ons probeer hom aanrand terwyl hy slaap. Kom ons wag tot pouse.”

Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns het lank laas so stadig verbygegaan. Harry het sy horlosie uiteindelik afgehaal en kyk nou gedurig op Ron s’n, maar Ron s’n loop so stadig dat hy kan sweer dat dit ook ophou werk het. Al drie van hulle is so moeg dat hulle hul koppe daar en dan op hul lessenaars sal kan neersit en slaap; tot Hermien maak nie soos gewoonlik aantekeninge nie, maar sit met haar kop op haar hand en staar na professor Binns met oë wat heeltemal uit fokus is.

Toe die klok uiteindelik lui, gaan hulle gou-gou na die gang wat na die Donker Kunste-klas lei en kry vir professor Moodie toe hy by die klas uitstap. Hy lyk net so moeg soos hulle. Die lid van sy normale oog hang en sy gesig lyk nog skewer as gewoonlik.

“Professor Moodie?” roep Harry toe hulle ’n pad deur die bondel mense na hom toe oopdruk.

“Hallo, Potter,” grom Moodie. Sy magiese oog volg ’n paar eerstejaars wat van pure senuagtigheid al vinniger stap; dan rol dit om na die agterkant van Moodie se kop en kyk hoe hulle om die hoek gaan voor hy praat. “Kom in.”

Hy staan opsy sodat hulle by sy lê klaskamer kan ingaan, hink agterna en maak die deur toe.

“Het u hom gekry?” vra Harry sonder om doekies om te draai. “Vir mnr. Crouch?”

“Nee,” sê Moodie. Hy stap na sy lessenaar, gaan sit, strek sy houtbeen met ’n effense kreun en haal sy heupfles uit.

“Het u die kaart gebruik?” vra Harry.

“Natuurlik,” sê Moodie terwyl hy ’n sluk uit die fles vat. “Het jou voorbeeld gevolg, Potter. Het dit met ’n Ontbiedtowerspreuk uit my kantoor Woud toe laat kom. Hy was glad nie daarop nie.”

“Dan het hy Gedisappareer,” sê Ron.

“Jy kan nie op die terrein Disappareer nie, Ron!” sê Hermien. “Daar is ander maniere waarop hy kon verdwyn het, nè, professor Moodie?”

Moodie se magiese oog bewee toe dit op Hermien tot rus kom.

“Jy is nog een wat aan ’n loopbaan as Auror kan dink,” sê hy vir haar. “Kop is reg aan geskroef, La Grange.”

Hermien word pienk van plesier.

“Wel, hy was nie onsigbaar nie,” sê Harry, “die kaart wys onsigbare mense. Dan moet hy die terrein verlaat het.”

“Maar self?” sê Hermien gretig. “Of omdat iemand hom gedwing het?”

“Ja, iemand kon – kon hom op ’n besem gelaai en met hom weggevlieg het, nie waar nie?” sê Ron vinnig terwyl hy vol afwagting na Moodie kyk asof hy wil hoor dat hy ook die aanleg het om ’n Auror te kan word.

“Ons kan ontvoering nie buite rekening laat nie,” grom Moodie.

“Dan dink u,” sê Ron, “dat hy dalk iewers in Hogsmeade is?”

“Kan enige plek wees,” sê Moodie en hy skud sy kop. “Al waarvan ons seker is, is dat hy nie hier is nie.”

Hy gaap so groot dat sy littekens rek en dis duidelik dat hy ’n hele paar tande in sy skewe mond kwyf is.

Toe sê hy, “Dompeldorius het vir my gesê dat julle drie jul lywe graag speurder hou, maar daar is niks wat julle vir Crouch kan doen nie. Die Ministerie is op soek na hom, Dompeldorius het hulle in kennis gestel. Potter, jy moet op daardie derde taak konsentreer.”

“Ekskuus?” sê Harry. “O ja . . .”

Hy het nog nie een keer aan die doolhof gedink sedert hy die vorige aand saam met Krum daar weg is nie.

“Behoort net die ding vir jou te wees daardie,” sê Moodie en hy kyk op na Harry terwyl hy die littekens op sy stoppelrige ken krap. “Volgens wat Dompeldorius gesê het, het jy al etlike kere met sulke goed te doen gehad. In jou eerste jaar jou weg gevind deur ’n reeks hindernisse wat die Townaar se Steen beskerm het.”

“Ons het gehelp,” sê Ron vinnig. “Ek en Hermien het gehelp.”

Moodie grinnik. “Wel, help hom om vir hierdie een voor te berei en ek sal baie verbaas wees as hy nie wen nie,” sê hy. “Intussen . . . voortdurende waaksaamheid, Potter. Voortdurende waaksaamheid.” Hy vat nog ’n groot sluk van sy heupfles en sy magiese oog draai na die venster. Die boonste seil van die Durmstrang-skip kan daardeur gesien word.

“Julle twee” – sy normale oog kyk na Ron en Hermien – “bly naby Potter, nè? Ek hou wel ’n oog oor alles, maar . . . daar kan nooit te veel oë wees wat rondkyk nie.”

Sirius stuur hulle uil die volgende dag terug. Dit fladder langs Harry neer op dieselfde oomblik dat ’n roofuil voor Hermien land met ’n eksemplaar van die *Daaglikse Profeet* in sy snawel. Sy neem die koerant, kyk vlugtig

na die eerste paar blaaië en sê, "Ha! Sy't snuf in die neus oor Crouch!" dan sluit sy by Ron en Harry aan om te lees wat Sirius oor die geheim-sinnige gebeure van die vorige aand te sê het.

Harry – wat dink jy doen jy om so saam met Viktor Krum in die Woud rond te loop? Ek wil hê jy moet sweer, per kerende uil, dat jy snags saam met niemand sal rondloop nie. Daar is iemand by Hogwarts wat uiters gevaarlik is. Dit is vir my duidelik dat hulle Crouch wou keer om vir Dompeldorius te sien en daar in die donkerte was jy waarskynlik net enkele tree van hulle af. Jy kon dood gewees het.

Jou naam het nie toevallig in die Beker Vol Vuur beland nie. As iemand jou wil aanval, is dit nou hul laaste kans. Bly by Ron en Hermien, moenie die Griffindortoring na ure verlaat nie en bewapen jouself vir die derde taak. Oefen Bedwelming en Ontwapening. 'n Paar vloeke sal ook nie skade doen nie. Daar's niks wat jy omtrent Crouch kan doen nie. Hou 'n lae profiel en pas jouself op. Ek wag vir die brief waarin jy my jou woord gee dat jy jou nie weer op verbode terrein sal bevind nie.

Sirius.

"Wie is hy miskien om vir my oor verbode terrein te staan en preek?" sê Harry ligweg omgekrap toe hy Sirius se brief opvou en in sy kleed steek. "Na alles wat hy op skool aangevang het!"

"Hy's bekommerd oor jou!" sê Hermien skerp. "Net soos Moodie en Hagrid! Luister tog na hulle!"

"Niemand het my nog hierdie hele jaar probeer aanval nie," sê Harry. "Niemand het nog enigiets probeer nie –"

"Behalwe om jou naam in die Beker vol Vuur te sit," sê Hermien. "En hulle het dit om 'n rede gedoen, Harry. Snuffels is reg. Dalk wag hulle net hul tyd af. Dalk is dit net mooi tydens die taak dat hulle jou gaan kry."

"Luister," sê Harry ongeduldig, "kom ons sê Snuffels is reg en iemand het vir Krum Bedwelming om vir Crouch te ontvoer, nê. Wel, dan was hulle mos tussen die bome daar naby ons, hê? Maar hulle wag tot ek weg is voor hulle iets doen, nê? Dit lyk dus nie juis asof ek hulle teiken was nie, nê?"

"Hulle sou dit nie soos 'n ongeluk kon laat lyk as hulle jou daar in die Woud vermoor het nie!" sê Hermien. "Maar as jy tydens die taak doodgaan –"

"Hulle het vere gevoel toe hulle vir Krum aangeval het," sê Harry. "Hoekom het hulle nie sommer terselfdertyd met my ook afgereken nie? Hulle kon dit laat lyk het asof ek en Krum 'n tweegeveg of iets gehad het."

"Harry, ek verstaan dit ook nie," sê Hermien wanhopig. "Ek weet net

dat daar baie snaakse goed aan die gang is en ek hou nie daarvan nie . . . Moodie is reg – Snuffels is reg – jy moet nou dadelik vir die derde taak begin voorberei. En sorg dat jy vir Sirius skryf en hom belowe dat jy nie weer alleen sal rondloop nie.”

Hogwarts se terrein het nog nooit tevore meer uitnodigend gelyk as nou dat Harry binne moet bly nie. Die volgende paar dae bring hy al sy vrye tyd in die biblioteek saam met Ron en Hermien deur. Hulle lees op oor vloeke, of sluip na lê klaskamers om daar te oefen. Harry konsentreer op die Bedwelmingstowerspreuk, wat hy nog nooit tevore gebruik het nie. Die moeilikheid is net dat Ron en Hermien sekere opofferings moet maak vir hom om te kan oefen.

“Kan ons nie vir mev. Norris ontvoer nie?” stel Ron een Maandag tydens die etensuur voor toe hy op die naat van sy rug in die middel van die Towerspreuk-klaskamer lê, nadat hy so pas vir die vyfde keer agtereenvolgens deur Harry Bedwelms en weer wakker gemaak is. “Kom ons Bedwelms haar ’n bietjie. Of jy kan vir Dobbi gebruik, Harry, ek wed hy sal enigiets doen om jou te help. Dis nie dat ek kla nie” – hy kom pynlik orent en vryf sy rug – “maar my hele lyf is seer . . .”

“Wel, jy hou aan om die kussings mis te val!” sê Hermien ongeduldig terwyl sy die stapel kussings regskuif wat hulle vir die Verdryftowerspreuk gebruik het en wat professor Flickerpitt in ’n kas bêre. “Probeer tog om agteroor te val!”

“As jy eers Bedwelms is, kan jy nie so goed mik nie, Hermien!” sê Ron ergerlik. “Hoekom neem jy nie ’n beurt nie?”

“Wel, ek dink Harry het dit nou onder die knie,” sê Hermien vinnig. “En ons hoef ons nie oor Ontwapening te bekommer nie; hy’t dit al jare gelede leer doen . . . Ek dink ons moet vanaand ’n paar van daardie vloeke probeer.”

Sy kyk na die lys wat hulle in die biblioteek gemaak het.

“Ek hou van hierdie een,” sê sy, “hierdie Dwarsboomvloed. Behoort enigiets wat jou wil aanval te stuit, Harry. Kom ons begin daarmee.”

Die klok lui. Hulle prop die kussings haastig terug in Flickerpitt se kas en glip by die klaskamer uit.

“Sien julle vir aandete!” sê Hermien wat afsit Rekenmatiek toe terwyl Harry en Ron na die Noordtoring en Waarsêery laat vat. Breë stroke verblindende goue sonlig val deur die hoë vensters oor die gang. Die lug daar buite is so ’n helderblou dat dit lyk asof dit van emalje gemaak is.

“Dit gaan kokend warm in Trelawney se kamer wees, sy’t altyd ’n vuur,” sê Ron toe hulle die trap uitklim wat na die silwer leer en die val-deur lei.

Hy is heeltemal reg. Die dofverligte vertrek is siedend warm. Die walms van die geparfumeerde vuur is swaarder as ooit. Harry se kop

duisel toe hy na een van die toegetrekte vensters stap. Terwyl professor Trelawney wegkyk om haar sjaal uit 'n lamp los te wikkel, maak hy dit 'n aks oop en gaan sit dan in die sisleunstoelel terwyl 'n ligte windjie oor sy gesig waai. Dit is baie beter.

"My engele," sê professor Trelawney en sy gaan sit in haar vleuelstoel voor die klas terwyl sy met haar eienaardig vergrote oë na hulle kyk, "ons is amper klaar met ons werk oor planetêre wiggelary. Vandag is egter 'n ideale geleentheid om die uitwerking van Mars te ondersoek siende dat hy op die oomblik baie interessant geplaas is. As julle almal hierheen kyk, sal ek die ligte verdof . . ."

Sy waai met haar towerstaf en die lampe gaan dood. Nou is die vuur die enigste bron van lig. Professor Trelawney buk af en haal 'n miniatuur-model van die sonnestelsel wat binne-in 'n glaskoepel is onder haar stoel uit. Dit is baie mooi; die mane hang glimmend in posisie in die yl lug onder die glas en wentel om die nege planeete, wat op hul beurt weer almal om die vurige son draai. Harry sit luitweg en kyk hoe professor Trelawney die fassinerende hoek wat Mars met Neptunus maak, uitwys. Die swaar geparfumeerde walms spoel oor hom en die briesie van die venster af speel oor sy gesig. Hy hoor 'n insek iewers agter die gordyn gons. Sy ooglede word swaar . . .

Op die rug van 'n ooruil seil hy deur die helderblou lug na 'n ou, met klimop begroeide huis wat hoog op 'n heuwel staan. Laer en laer vlieg hulle, die wind lekker koel in Harry se gesig, tot by 'n donker, gebreekte venster in die boonste verdieping van die huis. Hulle gaan in. Nou vlieg hulle met 'n donker gang na 'n vertrek heel aan die onderpunt . . . en deur die ingang na 'n donker kamer met toegespykerde vensters . . .

Harry klim van die uil se rug af . . . nou kyk hy oor die vertrek na 'n stoel wat met sy rug na hom staan . . . daar is twee donker vorms op die vloer langs die stoel . . . albei van hulle roer . . .

Een is 'n reuseslang . . . die ander 'n man . . . 'n kort pankopman met waterige oë en 'n skerp neus . . . hy lê snuiwend en snikkend op die mat voor die vuurherd . . .

"Jou geluk, Wurmstert," sê 'n koue, hoë stem vanuit die dieptes van die stoel waarop die uil geland het. "Jy is inderdaad baie gelukkig. Jou flater het nie alles vernietig nie. Hy is dood."

"My Heer!" snak die man op die vloer. "My Heer, ek is . . . ek is so bly . . . en so jammer . . ."

"Nagini," sê die koue stem, "dis nie jou dag nie. Ek sal Wurmstert na alles nie vir jou voer nie . . . maar moenie bekommerd wees nie' . . . Harry Potter is nog steeds daar . . ."

Die slang sis. Harry sien hoe sy tong flits.

"Nou, Wurmstert," sê die koue stem, "dalk net nog een aanmaning wat jou sal herinner dat ek nie nog flaters van jou sal duld nie . . ."

“My Heer . . . nee . . . ek smeek u . . .”

Die punt van ’n towerstaf verskyn uit die dieptes van die stoel. Dit wys na Wurmstert. “*Crucio*,” sê die koue stem.

Wurmstert skree, skree asof elke senuwee in sy liggaam aan die brand geslaan het, die krete vul Harry se ore terwyl die litteken op sy voorkop van pyn gloei; ook hy gil . . . Woldemort sal hom hoor, sal weet dat hy daar is . . .

“Harry! *Harry!*”

Harry maak sy oë oop. Hy lê op die vloer van professor Trelawney se kamer met sy hande oor sy gesig. Sy litteken brand so erg dat sy oë traan. Die pyn was eg. Die hele klas staan om hom en Ron kniel langs hom en lyk verskrik.

“Is jy oukei?” vra hy.

“Natuurlik nie,” sê professor Trelawney wat uiters opgewonde lyk. Haar groot oë hang starend bo Harry. “Wat was dit, Potter? ’n Voorgevoel? ’n Spook? Wat het jy gesien?”

“Niks,” jok Harry. Hy sit regop. Hy kan voel hoe hy bewe. Hy kan nie anders as om rondom hom en na die skaduwees agter hom te kyk nie; Woldemort se stem was so naby . . .

“Jy’t jou litteken vasgehou!” sê professor Trelawney. “Jy’t op die grond gerol en jou litteken vasgehou! Komaan, Potter, ek het ondervinding van sulke dinge!”

Harry kyk op na haar.

“Ek dink ek moet na die siekeboeg gaan,” sê hy. “Ek het ’n verskriklike hoofpyn.”

“My skat, jy is ongetwyfeld gestimuleer deur die uitsonderlike heldersiente vibrasies in my kamer!” sê professor Trelawney. “As jy nou uitgaan, sal jy die geleentheid verbeur om nog verder te sien as wat jy nog ooit –”

“Ek wil niks sien nie, net iets vir ’n hoofpyn,” sê Harry.

Hy staan op. Die klas staan terug. Almal lyk ontsenu.

“Sien jou later,” mompel Harry vir Ron toe hy sy sak optel en na die valdeur loop. Hy ignoreer vir professor Trelawney wat uiters gefrustreerd lyk, nes of sy so pas van ’n groot aardigheid ontnem is.

Toe Harry aan die onderpunt van die trapleer kom, gaan hy egter nie na die siekeboeg nie. Hy het hoegenaamd geen begeerte om soontoe te gaan nie. Sirius het vir hom gesê wat om te doen as sy litteken weer seer is en Harry gaan hierdie raad volg: hy gaan reguit na Dompeldorius se kantoor. Terwyl hy in die gang af stap, dink hy aan wat hy alles in die droom gesien het . . . dit was net so helder soos die een wat hom in Liggusterlaan wakker gemaak het . . . hy laat alles weer in besonderhede in sy gedagtes afspeel en probeer seker maak dat hy alles onthou . . . hy het gehoor hoe Woldemort vir Wurmstert beskuldig dat hy ’n fout gemaak

het . . . maar die uil het goeie nuus gebring, die fout is herstel, iemand is dood . . . dus gaan Wurmstert nie vir die slang gevoer word nie . . . hy, Harry, gaan in sy plek vir hom gevoer word . . .

Harry het verby die klipdrakekop wat die ingang na Dompeldorius se kantoor bewaak, gestap sonder dat hy dit eens agtergekom het. Hy knipper sy oë, kyk rond, besef waar hy is, stap terug en steek voor die drakekop vas. Dan onthou hy dat hy nie weet wat die wagwoord is nie.

“Suurlemoensorbet?” probeer hy huiwerig.

Die drakekop roer nie.

“Oukei,” sê Harry terwyl hy daarna staar. “Peerdruppels. H’m – drop-towerstaf. Sissende Frisballe. Boebels se Beste Borrelgom. Bertie Bott se Allegeurtjebone . . . ag nee, hy hou mos nie daarvan nie, nè? . . . Ag, gaan tog net oop, oukei?” sê hy ergerlik. “Ek móét hom sien. Dis dringend!”

Nog steeds roer die drakekop nie.

Harry skop daarna, maar kry niks reg nie behalwe dat sy groottoon verskriklik seerkry.

“Sjokoladepadda!” skree hy vererg terwyl hy op een been staan. “Sui-kerveerpen! Kakkerlakkklont!”

Die drakekop word skielik lewend en spring eenkant toe. Harry knipper sy oë.

“Kakkerlakkklont?” sê hy verbaas. “Ek het net ’n grap gemaak . . .”

Hy glip haastig deur die skreef in die muur en stap na die voet van ’n klipwenteltrap wat, toe die deure agter hom toegaan, stadig opwaarts beweeg en hom na ’n gepoleerde eikehoutdeur met ’n koperklopper neem.

Hy hoor stemme binne-in die kantoor. Hy klim van die bewegende trap af en luister aarselend.

“Dompeldorius, ek is bevrees ek sien nie die verbintenis nie, sien dit hoegenaamd nie!” Dit is die stem van die Minister vir Towerkuns, Cornelius Broddelwerk. “Ludo sê Bertha is heeltemal in staat om te verdwaal. Ek stem saam dat ’n mens kan verwag dat ons haar teen hierdie tyd al moes gekry het, maar daar is niks wat op vuilspel dui nie, Dompeldorius, hoegenaamd niks. So ook niks wat haar verdwyning aan Barty Crouch s’n koppel nie!”

“En wat dink jy het van Barty Crouch geword, minister?” sê Moodie se grommende stem.

“Ek sien twee moontlikhede, Alastor,” sê Broddelwerk. “Crouch het óf uiteindelik geknak – ’n groot waarskynlikheid in die lig van sy persoonlike geskiedenis, ek is seker almal sal daarmee saamstem – sy varkies verloor en dwaal iewers rond –”

“As dit die geval is, het hy uiters vinnig gedwaal, Cornelius,” sê Dompeldorius bedaard.

“Of anders – wel . . .” Broddelwerk klink verleë. “In ieder geval, ek sal nie ’n oordeel uitspreek voor ek nie die plek waar hy gevind is, gesien het

nie, maar jy sê dit was net anderkant die Beauxbatons-koets? Dompeldorius, jy weet tog wat daardie vrou is?”

“Ek beskou haar as ’n baie bekwame skoolhoof – en ’n bedrewe danser,” sê Dompeldorius stilweg.

“Dompeldorius, komaan!” sê Broddelwerk ergerlik. “Dink jy nie dat jy in haar guns bevooroordeel is as gevolg van Hagrid nie? Hulle is nie almal skadeloos nie – indien ’n mens Hagrid inderdaad skadeloos kan noem, met daardie monsterfiksie van hom –”

“Ek verdink Madame Maxine net so min as wat ek Hagrid verdink,” sê Dompeldorius nog steeds bedaard. “Ek dink jy is dalk die een wat bevooroordeel is, Cornelius.”

“Kan ons die gesprek nou afsluit?” grom Moodie.

“Ja, ja, kom ons gaan na die terrein,” sê Broddelwerk ongeduldig.

“Nee, dis nie dit nie,” sê Moodie, “dis net dat Potter ’n woordjie met jou wil wissel, Dompeldorius. Hy’s hier buite voor die deur.”

CHAPTER THIRTY



THE PENSIEVE

The door of the office opened.

“Hello, Potter,” said Moody. “Come in, then.”

Harry walked inside. He had been inside Dumbledore’s office once before; it was a very beautiful, circular room, lined with pictures of previous headmasters and headmistresses of Hogwarts, all of whom were fast asleep, their chests rising and falling gently.

Cornelius Fudge was standing beside Dumbledore’s desk, wearing his usual pinstriped cloak and holding his lime-green bowler hat.

“Harry!” said Fudge jovially, moving forward. “How are you?”

“Fine,” Harry lied.

“We were just talking about the night when Mr. Crouch turned up on the grounds,” said Fudge. “It was you who found him, was it not?”

“Yes,” said Harry. Then, feeling it was pointless to pretend that he hadn’t overheard what they had been saying, he added, “I didn’t see Madame Maxime anywhere, though, and she’d have a job hiding, wouldn’t she?”

Dumbledore smiled at Harry behind Fudge’s back, his eyes twinkling.

“Yes, well,” said Fudge, looking embarrassed, “we’re about to go for a short walk on the grounds, Harry, if you’ll excuse us . . . perhaps if you just go back to your class —”

“I wanted to talk to you, Professor,” Harry said quickly, looking at Dumbledore, who gave him a swift, searching look.

“Wait here for me, Harry,” he said. “Our examination of the grounds will not take long.”

They trooped out in silence past him and closed the door. After a minute or so, Harry heard the clunks of Moody’s wooden leg growing fainter in the corridor below. He looked around.

“Hello, Fawkes,” he said.

Fawkes, Professor Dumbledore’s phoenix, was standing on his golden perch beside the door. The size of a swan, with magnificent scarlet-and-gold plumage, he swished his long tail and blinked benignly at Harry.

Harry sat down in a chair in front of Dumbledore’s desk. For several minutes, he sat and watched the old headmasters and headmistresses snoozing in their frames, thinking about what he had just heard, and running his fingers over his scar. It had stopped

hurting now.

He felt much calmer, somehow, now that he was in Dumbledore's office, knowing he would shortly be telling him about the dream. Harry looked up at the walls behind the desk. The patched and ragged Sorting Hat was standing on a shelf. A glass case next to it held a magnificent silver sword with large rubies set into the hilt, which Harry recognized as the one he himself had pulled out of the Sorting Hat in his second year. The sword had once belonged to Godric Gryffindor, founder of Harry's House. He was gazing at it, remembering how it had come to his aid when he had thought all hope was lost, when he noticed a patch of silvery light, dancing and shimmering on the glass case. He looked around for the source of the light and saw a sliver of silver-white shining brightly from within a black cabinet behind him, whose door had not been closed properly. Harry hesitated, glanced at Fawkes, then got up, walked across the office, and pulled open the cabinet door.

A shallow stone basin lay there, with odd carvings around the edge: runes and symbols that Harry did not recognize. The silvery light was coming from the basin's contents, which were like nothing Harry had ever seen before. He could not tell whether the substance was liquid or gas. It was a bright, whitish silver, and it was moving ceaselessly; the surface of it became ruffled like water beneath wind, and then, like clouds, separated and swirled smoothly. It looked like light made liquid — or like wind made solid — Harry couldn't make up his mind.

He wanted to touch it, to find out what it felt like, but nearly four years' experience of the magical world told him that sticking his hand

into a bowl full of some unknown substance was a very stupid thing to do. He therefore pulled his wand out of the inside of his robes, cast a nervous look around the office, looked back at the contents of the basin, and prodded them.

The surface of the silvery stuff inside the basin began to swirl very fast.

Harry bent closer, his head right inside the cabinet. The silvery substance had become transparent; it looked like glass. He looked down into it, expecting to see the stone bottom of the basin — and saw instead an enormous room below the surface of the mysterious substance, a room into which he seemed to be looking through a circular window in the ceiling.

The room was dimly lit; he thought it might even be underground, for there were no windows, merely torches in brackets such as the ones that illuminated the walls of Hogwarts. Lowering his face so that his nose was a mere inch away from the glassy substance, Harry saw that rows and rows of witches and wizards were seated around every wall on what seemed to be benches rising in levels. An empty chair stood in the very center of the room. There was something about the chair that gave Harry an ominous feeling. Chains encircled the arms of it, as though its occupants were usually tied to it.

Where was this place? It surely wasn't Hogwarts; he had never seen a room like that here in the castle. Moreover, the crowd in the mysterious room at the bottom of the basin was comprised of adults, and Harry knew there were not nearly that many teachers at Hogwarts. They seemed, he thought, to be waiting for something; even though he could only see the tops of their hats, all of their faces

seemed to be pointing in one direction, and none of them were talking to one another.

The basin being circular, and the room he was observing square, Harry could not make out what was going on in the corners of it. He leaned even closer, tilting his head, trying to see . . .

The tip of his nose touched the strange substance into which he was staring.

Dumbledore's office gave an almighty lurch — Harry was thrown forward and pitched headfirst into the substance inside the basin —

But his head did not hit the stone bottom. He was falling through something icy-cold and black; it was like being sucked into a dark whirlpool —

And suddenly, Harry found himself sitting on a bench at the end of the room inside the basin, a bench raised high above the others. He looked up at the high stone ceiling, expecting to see the circular window through which he had just been staring, but there was nothing there but dark, solid stone.

Breathing hard and fast, Harry looked around him. Not one of the witches and wizards in the room (and there were at least two hundred of them) was looking at him. Not one of them seemed to have noticed that a fourteen-year-old boy had just dropped from the ceiling into their midst. Harry turned to the wizard next to him on the bench and uttered a loud cry of surprise that reverberated around the silent room.

He was sitting right next to Albus Dumbledore.

"Professor!" Harry said in a kind of strangled whisper. "I'm sorry — I didn't mean to — I was just looking at that basin in your cabinet

— I — where are we?”

But Dumbledore didn't move or speak. He ignored Harry completely. Like every other wizard on the benches, he was staring into the far corner of the room, where there was a door.

Harry gazed, nonplussed, at Dumbledore, then around at the silently watchful crowd, then back at Dumbledore. And then it dawned on him. . . .

Once before, Harry had found himself somewhere that nobody could see or hear him. That time, he had fallen through a page in an enchanted diary, right into somebody else's memory . . . and unless he was very much mistaken, something of the sort had happened again. . . .

Harry raised his right hand, hesitated, and then waved it energetically in front of Dumbledore's face. Dumbledore did not blink, look around at Harry, or indeed move at all. And that, in Harry's opinion, settled the matter. Dumbledore wouldn't ignore him like that. He was inside a memory, and this was not the present-day Dumbledore. Yet it couldn't be that long ago . . . the Dumbledore sitting next to him now was silver-haired, just like the present-day Dumbledore. But what was this place? What were all these wizards waiting for?

Harry looked around more carefully. The room, as he had suspected when observing it from above, was almost certainly underground — more of a dungeon than a room, he thought. There was a bleak and forbidding air about the place; there were no pictures on the walls, no decorations at all; just these serried rows of benches, rising in levels all around the room, all positioned so that

they had a clear view of that chair with the chains on its arms.

Before Harry could reach any conclusions about the place in which they were, he heard footsteps. The door in the corner of the dungeon opened and three people entered — or at least one man, flanked by two dementors.

Harry's insides went cold. The dementors — tall, hooded creatures whose faces were concealed — were gliding slowly toward the chair in the center of the room, each grasping one of the man's arms with their dead and rotten-looking hands. The man between them looked as though he was about to faint, and Harry couldn't blame him . . . he knew the dementors could not touch him inside a memory, but he remembered their power only too well. The watching crowd recoiled slightly as the dementors placed the man in the chained chair and glided back out of the room. The door swung shut behind them.

Harry looked down at the man now sitting in the chair and saw that it was Karkaroff.

Unlike Dumbledore, Karkaroff looked much younger; his hair and goatee were black. He was not dressed in sleek furs, but in thin and ragged robes. He was shaking. Even as Harry watched, the chains on the arms of the chair glowed suddenly gold and snaked their way up Karkaroff's arms, binding him there.

"Igor Karkaroff," said a curt voice to Harry's left. Harry looked around and saw Mr. Crouch standing up in the middle of the bench beside him. Crouch's hair was dark, his face was much less lined, he looked fit and alert. "You have been brought from Azkaban to present evidence to the Ministry of Magic. You have given us to understand

that you have important information for us.”

Karkaroff straightened himself as best he could, tightly bound to the chair.

“I have, sir,” he said, and although his voice was very scared, Harry could still hear the familiar unctuous note in it. “I wish to be of use to the Ministry. I wish to help. I — I know that the Ministry is trying to — to round up the last of the Dark Lord’s supporters. I am eager to assist in any way I can. . . .”

There was a murmur around the benches. Some of the wizards and witches were surveying Karkaroff with interest, others with pronounced mistrust. Then Harry heard, quite distinctly, from Dumbledore’s other side, a familiar, growling voice saying, “Filth.”

Harry leaned forward so that he could see past Dumbledore. Mad-Eye Moody was sitting there — except that there was a very noticeable difference in his appearance. He did not have his magical eye, but two normal ones. Both were looking down upon Karkaroff, and both were narrowed in intense dislike.

“Crouch is going to let him out,” Moody breathed quietly to Dumbledore. “He’s done a deal with him. Took me six months to track him down, and Crouch is going to let him go if he’s got enough new names. Let’s hear his information, I say, and throw him straight back to the dementors.”

Dumbledore made a small noise of dissent through his long, crooked nose.

“Ah, I was forgetting . . . you don’t like the dementors, do you, Albus?” said Moody with a sardonic smile.

“No,” said Dumbledore calmly, “I’m afraid I don’t. I have long felt

the Ministry is wrong to ally itself with such creatures.”

“But for filth like this . . .” Moody said softly.

“You say you have names for us, Karkaroff,” said Mr. Crouch. “Let us hear them, please.”

“You must understand,” said Karkaroff hurriedly, “that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named operated always in the greatest secrecy. . . . He preferred that we — I mean to say, his supporters — and I regret now, very deeply, that I ever counted myself among them —”

“Get on with it,” sneered Moody.

“— we never knew the names of every one of our fellows — He alone knew exactly who we all were —”

“Which was a wise move, wasn’t it, as it prevented someone like you, Karkaroff, from turning all of them in,” muttered Moody.

“Yet you say you have *some* names for us?” said Mr. Crouch.

“I — I do,” said Karkaroff breathlessly. “And these were important supporters, mark you. People I saw with my own eyes doing his bidding. I give this information as a sign that I fully and totally renounce him, and am filled with a remorse so deep I can barely —”

“These names are?” said Mr. Crouch sharply.

Karkaroff drew a deep breath.

“There was Antonin Dolohov,” he said. “I — I saw him torture countless Muggles and — and non-supporters of the Dark Lord.”

“And helped him do it,” murmured Moody.

“We have already apprehended Dolohov,” said Crouch. “He was caught shortly after yourself.”

“Indeed?” said Karkaroff, his eyes widening. “I — I am delighted to hear it!”

But he didn’t look it. Harry could tell that this news had come as a real blow to him. One of his names was worthless.

“Any others?” said Crouch coldly.

“Why, yes . . . there was Rosier,” said Karkaroff hurriedly. “Evan Rosier.”

“Rosier is dead,” said Crouch. “He was caught shortly after you were too. He preferred to fight rather than come quietly and was killed in the struggle.”

“Took a bit of me with him, though,” whispered Moody to Harry’s right. Harry looked around at him once more, and saw him indicating the large chunk out of his nose to Dumbledore.

“No — no more than Rosier deserved!” said Karkaroff, a real note of panic in his voice now. Harry could see that he was starting to worry that none of his information would be of any use to the Ministry. Karkaroff’s eyes darted toward the door in the corner, behind which the dementors undoubtedly still stood, waiting.

“Any more?” said Crouch.

“Yes!” said Karkaroff. “There was Travers — he helped murder the McKinnons! Mulciber — he specialized in the Imperius Curse, forced countless people to do horrific things! Rookwood, who was a spy, and passed He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named useful information from inside the Ministry itself!”

Harry could tell that, this time, Karkaroff had struck gold. The watching crowd was all murmuring together.

“Rookwood?” said Mr. Crouch, nodding to a witch sitting in front

of him, who began scribbling upon her piece of parchment. “Augustus Rookwood of the Department of Mysteries?”

“The very same,” said Karkaroff eagerly. “I believe he used a network of well-placed wizards, both inside the Ministry and out, to collect information —”

“But Travers and Mulciber we have,” said Mr. Crouch. “Very well, Karkaroff, if that is all, you will be returned to Azkaban while we decide —”

“Not yet!” cried Karkaroff, looking quite desperate. “Wait, I have more!”

Harry could see him sweating in the torchlight, his white skin contrasting strongly with the black of his hair and beard.

“Snape!” he shouted. “Severus Snape!”

“Snape has been cleared by this council,” said Crouch disdainfully. “He has been vouched for by Albus Dumbledore.”

“No!” shouted Karkaroff, straining at the chains that bound him to the chair. “I assure you! Severus Snape is a Death Eater!”

Dumbledore had gotten to his feet.

“I have given evidence already on this matter,” he said calmly. “Severus Snape was indeed a Death Eater. However, he rejoined our side before Lord Voldemort’s downfall and turned spy for us, at great personal risk. He is now no more a Death Eater than I am.”

Harry turned to look at Mad-Eye Moody. He was wearing a look of deep skepticism behind Dumbledore’s back.

“Very well, Karkaroff,” Crouch said coldly, “you have been of assistance. I shall review your case. You will return to Azkaban in the meantime. . . .”

Mr. Crouch's voice faded. Harry looked around; the dungeon was dissolving as though it were made of smoke; everything was fading; he could see only his own body — all else was swirling darkness. . . .

And then, the dungeon returned. Harry was sitting in a different seat, still on the highest bench, but now to the left side of Mr. Crouch. The atmosphere seemed quite different: relaxed, even cheerful. The witches and wizards all around the walls were talking to one another, almost as though they were at some sort of sporting event. Harry noticed a witch halfway up the rows of benches opposite. She had short blonde hair, was wearing magenta robes, and was sucking the end of an acid-green quill. It was, unmistakably, a younger Rita Skeeter. Harry looked around; Dumbledore was sitting beside him again, wearing different robes. Mr. Crouch looked more tired and somehow fiercer, gaunter. . . . Harry understood. It was a different memory, a different day . . . a different trial.

The door in the corner opened, and Ludo Bagman walked into the room.

This was not, however, a Ludo Bagman gone to seed, but a Ludo Bagman who was clearly at the height of his Quidditch-playing fitness. His nose wasn't broken now; he was tall and lean and muscular. Bagman looked nervous as he sat down in the chained chair, but it did not bind him there as it had bound Karkaroff, and Bagman, perhaps taking heart from this, glanced around at the watching crowd, waved at a couple of them, and managed a small smile.

“Ludo Bagman, you have been brought here in front of the Council

of Magical Law to answer charges relating to the activities of the Death Eaters,” said Mr. Crouch. “We have heard the evidence against you, and are about to reach our verdict. Do you have anything to add to your testimony before we pronounce judgment?”

Harry couldn’t believe his ears. *Ludo Bagman, a Death Eater?*

“Only,” said Bagman, smiling awkwardly, “well — I know I’ve been a bit of an idiot —”

One or two wizards and witches in the surrounding seats smiled indulgently. Mr. Crouch did not appear to share their feelings. He was staring down at Ludo Bagman with an expression of the utmost severity and dislike.

“You never spoke a truer word, boy,” someone muttered dryly to Dumbledore behind Harry. He looked around and saw Moody sitting there again. “If I didn’t know he’d always been dim, I’d have said some of those Bludgers had permanently affected his brain. . . .”

“Ludovic Bagman, you were caught passing information to Lord Voldemort’s supporters,” said Mr. Crouch. “For this, I suggest a term of imprisonment in Azkaban lasting no less than —”

But there was an angry outcry from the surrounding benches. Several of the witches and wizards around the walls stood up, shaking their heads, and even their fists, at Mr. Crouch.

“But I’ve told you, I had no idea!” Bagman called earnestly over the crowd’s babble, his round blue eyes widening. “None at all! Old Rookwood was a friend of my dad’s . . . never crossed my mind he was in with You-Know-Who! I thought I was collecting information for our side! And Rookwood kept talking about getting me a job in the Ministry later on . . . once my Quidditch days are over, you

know . . . I mean, I can't keep getting hit by Bludgers for the rest of my life, can I?"

There were titters from the crowd.

"It will be put to the vote," said Mr. Crouch coldly. He turned to the right-hand side of the dungeon. "The jury will please raise their hands . . . those in favor of imprisonment . . ."

Harry looked toward the right-hand side of the dungeon. Not one person raised their hand. Many of the witches and wizards around the walls began to clap. One of the witches on the jury stood up.

"Yes?" barked Crouch.

"We'd just like to congratulate Mr. Bagman on his splendid performance for England in the Quidditch match against Turkey last Saturday," the witch said breathlessly.

Mr. Crouch looked furious. The dungeon was ringing with applause now. Bagman got to his feet and bowed, beaming.

"Despicable," Mr. Crouch spat at Dumbledore, sitting down as Bagman walked out of the dungeon. "Rookwood get him a job indeed. . . . The day Ludo Bagman joins us will be a sad day indeed for the Ministry. . . ."

And the dungeon dissolved again. When it had returned, Harry looked around. He and Dumbledore were still sitting beside Mr. Crouch, but the atmosphere could not have been more different. There was total silence, broken only by the dry sobs of a frail, wispy-looking witch in the seat next to Mr. Crouch. She was clutching a handkerchief to her mouth with trembling hands. Harry looked up at Crouch and saw that he looked gaunter and grayer than ever before. A nerve was twitching in his temple.

“Bring them in,” he said, and his voice echoed through the silent dungeon.

The door in the corner opened yet again. Six dementors entered this time, flanking a group of four people. Harry saw the people in the crowd turn to look up at Mr. Crouch. A few of them whispered to one another.

The dementors placed each of the four people in the four chairs with chained arms that now stood on the dungeon floor. There was a thickset man who stared blankly up at Crouch; a thinner and more nervous-looking man, whose eyes were darting around the crowd; a woman with thick, shining dark hair and heavily hooded eyes, who was sitting in the chained chair as though it were a throne; and a boy in his late teens, who looked nothing short of petrified. He was shivering, his straw-colored hair all over his face, his freckled skin milk-white. The wispy little witch beside Crouch began to rock backward and forward in her seat, whimpering into her handkerchief.

Crouch stood up. He looked down upon the four in front of him, and there was pure hatred in his face.

“You have been brought here before the Council of Magical Law,” he said clearly, “so that we may pass judgment on you, for a crime so heinous —”

“Father,” said the boy with the straw-colored hair. “Father . . . please . . .”

“— that we have rarely heard the like of it within this court,” said Crouch, speaking more loudly, drowning out his son’s voice. “We have heard the evidence against you. The four of you stand accused of capturing an Auror — Frank Longbottom — and subjecting him to

the Cruciatus Curse, believing him to have knowledge of the present whereabouts of your exiled master, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named —”

“Father, I didn’t!” shrieked the boy in chains below. “I didn’t, I swear it, Father, don’t send me back to the dementors —”

“You are further accused,” bellowed Mr. Crouch, “of using the Cruciatus Curse on Frank Longbottom’s wife, when he would not give you information. You planned to restore He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named to power, and to resume the lives of violence you presumably led while he was strong. I now ask the jury —”

“Mother!” screamed the boy below, and the wispy little witch beside Crouch began to sob, rocking backward and forward. “Mother, stop him, Mother, I didn’t do it, it wasn’t me!”

“I now ask the jury,” shouted Mr. Crouch, “to raise their hands if they believe, as I do, that these crimes deserve a life sentence in Azkaban!”

In unison, the witches and wizards along the right-hand side of the dungeon raised their hands. The crowd around the walls began to clap as it had for Bagman, their faces full of savage triumph. The boy began to scream.

“No! Mother, no! I didn’t do it, I didn’t do it, I didn’t know! Don’t send me there, don’t let him!”

The dementors were gliding back into the room. The boys’ three companions rose quietly from their seats; the woman with the heavy-lidded eyes looked up at Crouch and called, “The Dark Lord will rise again, Crouch! Throw us into Azkaban; we will wait! He will rise again and will come for us, he will reward us beyond any of his

other supporters! We alone were faithful! We alone tried to find him!”

But the boy was trying to fight off the dementors, even though Harry could see their cold, draining power starting to affect him. The crowd was jeering, some of them on their feet, as the woman swept out of the dungeon, and the boy continued to struggle.

“I’m your son!” he screamed up at Crouch. “I’m your son!”

“You are no son of mine!” bellowed Mr. Crouch, his eyes bulging suddenly. “I have no son!”

The wispy witch beside him gave a great gasp and slumped in her seat. She had fainted. Crouch appeared not to have noticed.

“Take them away!” Crouch roared at the dementors, spit flying from his mouth. “Take them away, and may they rot there!”

“Father! Father, I wasn’t involved! No! No! Father, please!”

“I think, Harry, it is time to return to my office,” said a quiet voice in Harry’s ear.

Harry started. He looked around. Then he looked on his other side.

There was an Albus Dumbledore sitting on his right, watching Crouch’s son being dragged away by the dementors — and there was an Albus Dumbledore on his left, looking right at him.

“Come,” said the Dumbledore on his left, and he put his hand under Harry’s elbow. Harry felt himself rising into the air; the dungeon dissolved around him; for a moment, all was blackness, and then he felt as though he had done a slow-motion somersault, suddenly landing flat on his feet, in what seemed like the dazzling light of Dumbledore’s sunlit office. The stone basin was shimmering in the cabinet in front of him, and Albus Dumbledore was standing

beside him.

“Professor,” Harry gasped, “I know I shouldn’t’ve — I didn’t mean — the cabinet door was sort of open and —”

“I quite understand,” said Dumbledore. He lifted the basin, carried it over to his desk, placed it upon the polished top, and sat down in the chair behind it. He motioned for Harry to sit down opposite him.

Harry did so, staring at the stone basin. The contents had returned to their original, silvery-white state, swirling and rippling beneath his gaze.

“What is it?” Harry asked shakily.

“This? It is called a Pensieve,” said Dumbledore. “I sometimes find, and I am sure you know the feeling, that I simply have too many thoughts and memories crammed into my mind.”

“Er,” said Harry, who couldn’t truthfully say that he had ever felt anything of the sort.

“At these times,” said Dumbledore, indicating the stone basin, “I use the Pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one’s mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one’s leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form.”

“You mean . . . that stuff’s your *thoughts*?” Harry said, staring at the swirling white substance in the basin.

“Certainly,” said Dumbledore. “Let me show you.”

Dumbledore drew his wand out of the inside of his robes and placed the tip into his own silvery hair, near his temple. When he took the wand away, hair seemed to be clinging to it — but then Harry saw that it was in fact a glistening strand of the same strange

silvery-white substance that filled the Pensieve. Dumbledore added this fresh thought to the basin, and Harry, astonished, saw his own face swimming around the surface of the bowl. Dumbledore placed his long hands on either side of the Pensieve and swirled it, rather as a gold prospector would pan for fragments of gold . . . and Harry saw his own face change smoothly into Snape's, who opened his mouth and spoke to the ceiling, his voice echoing slightly.

"It's coming back . . . Karkaroff's too . . . stronger and clearer than ever . . ."

"A connection I could have made without assistance," Dumbledore sighed, "but never mind." He peered over the top of his half-moon spectacles at Harry, who was gaping at Snape's face, which was continuing to swirl around the bowl. "I was using the Pensieve when Mr. Fudge arrived for our meeting and put it away rather hastily. Undoubtedly I did not fasten the cabinet door properly. Naturally, it would have attracted your attention."

"I'm sorry," Harry mumbled.

Dumbledore shook his head. "Curiosity is not a sin," he said. "But we should exercise caution with our curiosity . . . yes, indeed . . ."

Frowning slightly, he prodded the thoughts within the basin with the tip of his wand. Instantly, a figure rose out of it, a plump, scowling girl of about sixteen, who began to revolve slowly, with her feet still in the basin. She took no notice whatsoever of Harry or Professor Dumbledore. When she spoke, her voice echoed as Snape's had done, as though it were coming from the depths of the stone basin. "He put a hex on me, Professor Dumbledore, and I was only teasing him, sir, I only said I'd seen him kissing Florence behind

the greenhouses last Thursday. . . .”

“But why, Bertha,” said Dumbledore sadly, looking up at the now silently revolving girl, “why did you have to follow him in the first place?”

“Bertha?” Harry whispered, looking up at her. “Is that — was that Bertha Jorkins?”

“Yes,” said Dumbledore, prodding the thoughts in the basin again; Bertha sank back into them, and they became silvery and opaque once more. “That was Bertha as I remember her at school.”

The silvery light from the Pensieve illuminated Dumbledore’s face, and it struck Harry suddenly how very old he was looking. He knew, of course, that Dumbledore was getting on in years, but somehow he never really thought of Dumbledore as an old man.

“So, Harry,” said Dumbledore quietly. “Before you got lost in my thoughts, you wanted to tell me something.”

“Yes,” said Harry. “Professor — I was in Divination just now, and — er — I fell asleep.”

He hesitated here, wondering if a reprimand was coming, but Dumbledore merely said, “Quite understandable. Continue.”

“Well, I had a dream,” said Harry. “A dream about Lord Voldemort. He was torturing Wormtail . . . you know who Wormtail —”

“I do know,” said Dumbledore promptly. “Please continue.”

“Voldemort got a letter from an owl. He said something like, Wormtail’s blunder had been repaired. He said someone was dead. Then he said, Wormtail wouldn’t be fed to the snake — there was a snake beside his chair. He said — he said he’d be feeding me to it,

instead. Then he did the Cruciatus Curse on Wormtail — and my scar hurt,” Harry said. “It woke me up, it hurt so badly.”

Dumbledore merely looked at him.

“Er — that’s all,” said Harry.

“I see,” said Dumbledore quietly. “I see. Now, has your scar hurt at any other time this year, excepting the time it woke you up over the summer?”

“No, I — how did you know it woke me up over the summer?” said Harry, astonished.

“You are not Sirius’s only correspondent,” said Dumbledore. “I have also been in contact with him ever since he left Hogwarts last year. It was I who suggested the mountainside cave as the safest place for him to stay.”

Dumbledore got up and began walking up and down behind his desk. Every now and then, he placed his wand-tip to his temple, removed another shining silver thought, and added it to the Pensieve. The thoughts inside began to swirl so fast that Harry couldn’t make out anything clearly: It was merely a blur of color.

“Professor?” he said quietly, after a couple of minutes.

Dumbledore stopped pacing and looked at Harry.

“My apologies,” he said quietly. He sat back down at his desk.

“D’you — d’you know why my scar’s hurting me?”

Dumbledore looked very intently at Harry for a moment, and then said, “I have a theory, no more than that. . . . It is my belief that your scar hurts both when Lord Voldemort is near you, and when he is feeling a particularly strong surge of hatred.”

“But . . . why?”

“Because you and he are connected by the curse that failed,” said Dumbledore. “That is no ordinary scar.”

“So you think . . . that dream . . . did it really happen?”

“It is possible,” said Dumbledore. “I would say — probable. Harry — did you see Voldemort?”

“No,” said Harry. “Just the back of his chair. But — there wouldn’t have been anything to see, would there? I mean, he hasn’t got a body, has he? But . . . but then how could he have held the wand?” Harry said slowly.

“How indeed?” muttered Dumbledore. “How indeed . . .”

Neither Dumbledore nor Harry spoke for a while. Dumbledore was gazing across the room, and, every now and then, placing his wand-tip to his temple and adding another shining silver thought to the seething mass within the Pensieve.

“Professor,” Harry said at last, “do you think he’s getting stronger?”

“Voldemort?” said Dumbledore, looking at Harry over the Pensieve. It was the characteristic, piercing look Dumbledore had given him on other occasions, and always made Harry feel as though Dumbledore were seeing right through him in a way that even Moody’s magical eye could not. “Once again, Harry, I can only give you my suspicions.”

Dumbledore sighed again, and he looked older, and wearier, than ever.

“The years of Voldemort’s ascent to power,” he said, “were marked with disappearances. Bertha Jorkins has vanished without a trace in the place where Voldemort was certainly known to be last.

Mr. Crouch too has disappeared . . . within these very grounds. And there was a third disappearance, one which the Ministry, I regret to say, do not consider of any importance, for it concerns a Muggle. His name was Frank Bryce, he lived in the village where Voldemort's father grew up, and he has not been seen since last August. You see, I read the Muggle newspapers, unlike most of my Ministry friends."

Dumbledore looked very seriously at Harry.

"These disappearances seem to me to be linked. The Ministry disagrees — as you may have heard, while waiting outside my office."

Harry nodded. Silence fell between them again, Dumbledore extracting thoughts every now and then. Harry felt as though he ought to go, but his curiosity held him in his chair.

"Professor?" he said again.

"Yes, Harry?" said Dumbledore.

"Er . . . could I ask you about . . . that court thing I was in . . . in the Pensieve?"

"You could," said Dumbledore heavily. "I attended it many times, but some trials come back to me more clearly than others . . . particularly now. . . ."

"You know — you know the trial you found me in? The one with Crouch's son? Well . . . were they talking about Neville's parents?"

Dumbledore gave Harry a very sharp look. "Has Neville never told you why he has been brought up by his grandmother?" he said.

Harry shook his head, wondering, as he did so, how he could have failed to ask Neville this, in almost four years of knowing him.

"Yes, they were talking about Neville's parents," said

Dumbledore. “His father, Frank, was an Auror just like Professor Moody. He and his wife were tortured for information about Voldemort’s whereabouts after he lost his powers, as you heard.”

“So they’re dead?” said Harry quietly.

“No,” said Dumbledore, his voice full of a bitterness Harry had never heard there before. “They are insane. They are both in St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. I believe Neville visits them, with his grandmother, during the holidays. They do not recognize him.”

Harry sat there, horror-struck. He had never known . . . never, in four years, bothered to find out . . .

“The Longbottoms were very popular,” said Dumbledore. “The attacks on them came after Voldemort’s fall from power, just when everyone thought they were safe. Those attacks caused a wave of fury such as I have never known. The Ministry was under great pressure to catch those who had done it. Unfortunately, the Longbottoms’ evidence was — given their condition — none too reliable.”

“Then Mr. Crouch’s son might not have been involved?” said Harry slowly.

Dumbledore shook his head.

“As to that, I have no idea.”

Harry sat in silence once more, watching the contents of the Pensieve swirl. There were two more questions he was burning to ask . . . but they concerned the guilt of living people. . . .

“Er,” he said, “Mr. Bagman . . .”

“. . . has never been accused of any Dark activity since,” said Dumbledore calmly.

“Right,” said Harry hastily, staring at the contents of the Pensieve again, which were swirling more slowly now that Dumbledore had stopped adding thoughts. “And . . . er . . .”

But the Pensieve seemed to be asking his question for him. Snape’s face was swimming on the surface again. Dumbledore glanced down into it, and then up at Harry.

“No more has Professor Snape,” he said.

Harry looked into Dumbledore’s light blue eyes, and the thing he really wanted to know spilled out of his mouth before he could stop it.

“What made you think he’d really stopped supporting Voldemort, Professor?”

Dumbledore held Harry’s gaze for a few seconds, and then said, “That, Harry, is a matter between Professor Snape and myself.”

Harry knew that the interview was over; Dumbledore did not look angry, yet there was a finality in his tone that told Harry it was time to go. He stood up, and so did Dumbledore.

“Harry,” he said as Harry reached the door. “Please do not speak about Neville’s parents to anybody else. He has the right to let people know, when he is ready.”

“Yes, Professor,” said Harry, turning to go.

“And —”

Harry looked back. Dumbledore was standing over the Pensieve, his face lit from beneath by its silvery spots of light, looking older than ever. He stared at Harry for a moment, and then said, “Good luck with the third task.”

Die Peinssif

Die kantoor se deur gaan oop.

“Hallo, Potter,” sê Moodie. “Kom binne.”

Harry stap in. Hy was nog net een keer vantevore in Dompeldorius se kantoor; dit is ’n baie mooi, sirkelvormige vertrek met portrette van Hogwarts se oudskoolhoofde teen die mure. Hulle is almal vas aan die slaap en hul borskasse dein rustig op en neer.

Cornelius Broddelwerk staan langs Dompeldorius se lessenaar. Hy dra sy gewone strepieskleed en hou sy lemmetjiegroen hardebolkeil in sy hand vas.

“Harry!” sê Broddelwerk joviaal en kom vorentoe. “Hoe gaan dit?”

“Goed,” jok Harry.

“Ons het nou net oor die nag toe mnr. Crouch op die terrein was, gepraat,” sê Broddelwerk. “Dit was jy wat hom gekry het, nè?”

“Ja,” sê Harry. Toe, omdat hy voel dat dit sinneloos is om te maak of hy nie kon hoor wat hulle sê nie, voeg hy by, “Ek het Madame Maxine egter nêrens gesien nie en sy sal nogal sukkel om nie gesien te word nie, nè?”

Dompeldorius glimlag vir Harry agter Broddelwerk se rug en sy oë vonkel.

“Ja, wel,” sê Broddelwerk en hy lyk verleë, “ons is op die punt om ’n entjie op die terrein te gaan stap, Harry, as jy ons sal verskoon . . . misken moet jy net teruggaan klas toe –”

“Ek wil graag met u praat, professor,” sê Harry vinnig terwyl hy na Dompeldorius staar, wat vinnig en ondersoekend na hom kyk.

“Wag hier vir my, Harry,” sê hy. “Ons besigtiging van die terrein sal nie lank duur nie.”

Hulle stap in stilte verby hom en maak die deur toe. Na ’n rukkie hoor Harry hoe die geklonk van Moodie se houtbeen al sagter in die onderste gang word. Hy kyk om hom.

“Hallo, Fawkes,” sê hy.

Fawkes, Dompeldorius se feniks, staan op sy goue dwarsstok langs die deur. Hy is so groot soos ’n swaan en het manjifieke skarlakenrooi en

goue vere. Hy waai sy lang stert en knipper sy oë gemoedelik toe hy Harry sien.

Harry gaan sit in 'n stoel voor Dompeldorius se lessenaar. Hy kyk vir 'n paar minute na die oudskoolhoofde wat in hul rame sit en snork en dink aan alles wat hy gehoor het terwyl sy vingers oor sy litteken speel. Dit is nie meer seer nie.

Hy voel baie rustiger vandat hy in Dompeldorius se kantoor is en weet dat hy hom binnekort van die droom gaan vertel. Harry kyk na die mure agter die lessenaar. Die gelapte en vertoingde Sorteelhoed staan op 'n rak. Langsaan is 'n glaskas met 'n manjifieke silwer swaard versier met robyne wat in die hef ingelê is. Harry herken dit as die een wat hy in sy tweede jaar uit die Sorteelhoed gehaal het. Die swaard het vroeër aan Godric Griffindor behoort, die stigter van Harry se huis. Hy staan daarna en onthou hoe dit tot sy redding gekom het toe hy op die punt was om moed op te gee. Dan merk hy 'n silwer ligkol wat glimmend op die glaskas rondans. Hy kyk om hom rond op soek na die bron van die lig en sien 'n silwerwit ligstraal wat helder skyn uit 'n swart kabinet waarvan die deur nie behoorlik toegemaak is nie. Harry aarsel, kyk vlugtig na Fawkes, staan op, stap deur die kantoor en maak die kasdeur oop.

Daar staan 'n vlak klipkom met vreemde kerfwerk om die rand; runes en simbole wat Harry nie herken nie. Die silwer lig kom uit die inhoud van die kom, iets wat Harry nog nooit tevore gesien het nie. Hy kan nie sê of dit 'n vloeistof of 'n gas is nie. Dit is 'n helder, witterige silwerkleur en is die hele tyd aan die beweeg; die oppervlak het rimpels soos water onder die wind en dan warrel dit weer soos wolke gladweg uitmekaar. Dit lyk soos lig wat vloeibaar geword het – of soos wind wat solied is – Harry kan nie eintlik besluit nie.

Hy wou so half daaraan raak om uit te vind waarna dit voel, maar amper vier jaar se ervaring in die towerwêreld het hom geleer dat om jou hand in 'n bak vol van die een of ander vreemde stof te steek 'n baie dom ding is. Hy haal dus sy towerstaf uit die binnekant van sy kleed, loer senuagtig in die kantoor rond, kyk terug na die inhoud van die kom en druk-druk daaraan. Die oppervlak van die silwer goed in die kom warrel nou baie vinnig rond.

Harry leun nader sodat sy kop heeltemal binne-in die kas is. Nou is die silwerige stof deurskynend; dit lyk soos glas. Hy kyk af daarin in die verwagting dat hy die kom se bodem sal sien – en sien in stede daarvan 'n enorme vertrek onder die oppervlak van die geheimsinnige stof, 'n vertrek waarop hy oënskynlik deur 'n sirkelvormige venster in die plafon afkyk.

Die kamer is dofweg verlig; hy reken dat dit ondergronds kan wees want daar is geen vensters nie, bloot fakkels in klampe soos dié wat Hogwarts se mure verlig. Hy laat sak sy gesig sodat sy neus net 'n kort entjie

bo die glasagtige stof is en sien rye en rye hekse en towenaars wat teen die mure sit op goed wat soos banke lyk en wat in stellasies boontoe styg. Reg in die middel van die vertrek staan 'n leë stoel. Daar is iets aan die stoel wat Harry onrustig laat voel. Daar is kettings om die arms gedraai asof die insittendes gewoonlik daaraan vasgemaak word.

Waar is hierdie plek? Dit is beslis nie Hogwarts nie; hy het nog nooit so 'n vertrek iewers in die kasteel gesien nie. Boonop is die mense in die geheimsinnige vertrek onder die kom almal volwassenes en Harry weet daar is nie naastenby soveel onderwysers by Hogwarts nie. Dit lyk asof hulle op iets wag, dink hy. Hoewel hy net die bokante van hul punthoede kan sien, lyk dit asof almal van hulle in dieselfde rigting kyk en niemand praat met mekaar nie.

Omdat die kom sirkelvormig en die vertrek waarna hy kyk vierkantig is, kan Harry nie uitmaak wat in die hoeke aangaan nie. Hy leun nog nader en draai sy kop skuins in 'n poging om te sien . . .

Die punt van sy neus raak aan die snaakse stof waarin hy staar.

Dompeldorius se kantoor gee 'n geweldige ruk – Harry word vooroor geslinger sodat hy kop eerste binne-in die kom val –

Sy kop tref egter nie die klipbodem nie. Hy val deur iets wat ysig koud en swart is; dis asof hy in 'n donker draaikolk ingesuijg word –

En skielik bevind hy homself op 'n bank aan die punt van die vertrek binne-in die kom, 'n bank wat hoog bo die ander verhewe is. Hy kyk op na die hoë klipplafon in die verwagting om die ronde venster waardeur hy nou net gestaar het te sien, maar daar is niks behalwe soliede, donker klip nie.

Harry haal hard en vinnig asem toe hy om hom kyk. Nie een van die hekse en towenaars in die vertrek (en daar is ten minste tweehonderd van hulle) kyk na hom nie. Dis of niemand opgelet het dat 'n veertienjarige seun so pas uit die plafon geval en tussen hulle geland het nie. Harry draai na die towenaar langs hom op die bank en hy uiter 'n harde en verbaasde kreet wat deur die stil vertrek weergalm.

Hy sit reg langs Albus Dompeldorius.

“Professor!” sê Harry in 'n gesmoorde fluisterstem. “Ek is jammer – ek het nie bedoel – ek het net in daardie kom in u kas – ek – waar is ons?”

Maar Dompeldorius antwoord of roer nie. Hy ignoreer Harry heeltemal. Soos al die ander towenaars op die banke, staar hy na 'n deur in die verste hoek van die vertrek.

Dronkgeslaan kyk Harry na Dompeldorius, na die wagtende, stil skare en dan weer terug na Dompeldorius. Dan dring dit tot hom deur . . .

Hy het homself al eenkeer vantevore iewers bevind waar niemand hom kon sien of hoor nie. Daardie keer het hy dwarsdeur 'n bladsy in 'n betowerde dagboek, tot binne-in iemand anders se geheue geval . . . en tensy hy 'n baie groot fout maak, het iets soortgelyks so pas weer gebeur . . .

Harry lig sy regterhand, aarsel en waai dit woens voor Dompeldorius se gesig rond. Dompeldorius knip nie 'n oog nie, hy kyk nie na Harry nie, hy roer nie. Wat Harry betref, los dit die saak op. Dompeldorius sal hom nie sommer net ignoreer nie. Hy is binne-in 'n herinnering en *dit* is nie die huidige Dompeldorius nie. Dit kan egter nie te lank gelede gewees het nie . . . die Dompeldorius wat langs hom sit, het silwer hare net soos die huidige Dompeldorius. Maar waar is hierdie plek? Waarop wag al hierdie towenaars?

Harry kyk nou deegliker om hom rond. Die vertrek is, soos hy vermoed het toe hy van bo af gekyk het, beslis ondergronds – dis eerder 'n kerker as 'n kamer, dink hy. Daar is iets troosteloos en afskrikwekkends aan die plek; daar is geen prente teen die mure nie, hoegenaamd geen versierings nie; net die rye banke wat in stellages om die vertrek geplaas is sodat die stoel met die kettings om die arms van oral af duidelik gesien kan word.

Voor Harry enige gevolgtrekkings oor die plek kan maak, hoor hy voetstappe. Die deur in die hoek van die kerker gaan oop en drie mense kom in – of ten minste, een mens met 'n Dementor aan weerskante van hom.

Harry se ingewande word koud. Die Dementors, lang wesens in mantels met kappe wat hul gesigte heeltemal versteek, gly stadig na die stoel in die middel van die vertrek, elkeen hou een van die man se arms vas met hande wat dood en verrot lyk. Die man tussen hulle lyk asof hy gaan flou word en Harry kan hom glad nie blameer nie . . . hy weet dat die Dementors niks aan hom binne-in 'n herinnering kan doen nie, maar hy onthou hul magte baie goed. Die wagtende skare deins effens terug toe die Dementors die man in die gekettingde stoel laat sit en toe uit die vertrek gly. Die deur swaai agter hulle toe.

Harry kyk af na die man wat in die stoel sit en sien dat dit Karkaroff is.

Anders as Dompeldorius, lyk Karkaroff baie jonger; sy hare en bokbaardjie is swart. Hy dra nie 'n gladde pels nie, maar 'n dun, toingrige kleed. Hy bewe. Voor Harry se oë gloei die kettings aan die stoel se armleunings skielik goudgeel, krul dan soos slange om sy arms en bind hom vas.

“Igor Karkaroff,” sê 'n strak stem aan Harry se linkerkant. Harry kyk om en sien dat mnr. Crouch in die middel van die ry banke voor hom opgestaan het. Crouch se hare is donker, sy gesig is minder beplooid en hy lyk op en wakker. “Jy is van Azkaban af hierheen gebring om getuienis voor die Ministerie vir Towerkuns te lewer. Jy het ons laat verstaan dat jy belangrike inligting vir ons het.”

Hoewel Karkaroff aan die stoel vasgebind is, sit hy so regop moontlik.

“Ek het, meneer,” sê hy en hoewel sy stem baie bang klink, kan Harry

die bekende vleierende klank daarin hoor. “Ek wil graag die Ministerie van hulp wees. Ek – ek weet dat die Ministerie graag die – die laaste van die Donker Heer se volgelinge in hegtenis wil neem. Ek is gretig om die Ministerie op elke moontlike manier by te staan . . .”

Daar is ’n gemompel van stemme vanuit die banke. Party van die hekse en towenaars kyk vol belangstelling na Karkaroff, ander is duidelik wantrouig. Toe hoor Harry ’n bekende grommende stem aan Dompeldorius se ander kant wat heeltemal duidelik sê, “Vullis!”

Harry leun vooroor sodat hy verby Dompeldorius kan sien. Daar sit Maloog Moodie – hoewel daar ’n merkbare verskil in sy voorkoms is. Hy het nie ’n magiese oog nie, wel twee normale oë. Albei kyk af na Karkaroff en albei is op skrefies van pure weersin.

“Crouch gaan hom laat loop,” blaas Moodie stil vir Dompeldorius. “Hy’t ’n ooreenkoms met hom aangegaan. Het my ses maande gekos om hom op te spoor en Crouch sal hom laat loop as hy genoeg nuwe name uitblaker. Kom ons luister na wat hy te sê het, is wat *ek* sê, en dan gooi ons hom weer vir die Dementors.”

Dompeldorius maak ’n klein afkeurende geluidjie deur sy lang, krom neus.

“A, ek het vergeet . . . jy hou nie van die Dementors nie, hè, Albus?” sê Moodie met ’n sardoniese glimlag.

“Nee,” sê Dompeldorius bedaad, “ek is bevrees nie. Ek voel al lank dat die Ministerie ’n fout maak deur hulself met sulke wesens te vereenselwig.”

“Maar vir vullis soos dié . . .” sê Moodie sag.

“Jy sê dat jy vir ons name het, Karkaroff,” sê mnr. Crouch. “Laat ons hoor, asseblief.”

“Julle moet verstaan,” sê Karkaroff gejaag, “dat Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie altyd in die grootste geheim opgetree het . . . hy het verkies dat ons – ek bedoel, sy volgelinge – en ek is van harte spyt dat ek ooit een van hulle was –”

“Kry end,” sê Moodie smalend.

“– dat ons nooit die name van al die lede geken het nie – net hy het geweet presies wie almal is –”

“’n Goeie skuif, dan nie, as dit iemand soos jy sal verhinder om almal te verraaï,” brom Moodie.

“Tog sê jy dat jy wel *sommige* name vir ons kan gee?” sê mnr. Crouch.

“Ek – ek kan,” sê Karkaroff uitasem. “En dis belangrike ondersteuners, hoor wat ek sê. Mense wat ek met my eie oë sy opdragte sien uitvoer het. Ek gee hierdie inligting as ’n teken dat ek hom ten volle en absoluut afsweer en dat ek so diep met berou vervul is dat ek skaars kan –”

“En hierdie name is?” sê mnr. Crouch skerp.

Karkaroff trek sy asem diep in.

“Daar was Antonin Dolohof,” sê hy. “Ek – ek het gesien hoe hy talle Moggels martel en – en ook teenstanders van die Donker Heer.”

“Hom seker gehelp ook,” mompel Moodie.

“Ons het Dolohof reeds vasgetrek,” sê Crouch. “Hy is kort na jou gevang.”

“Inderdaad?” sê Karkaroff en sy oë rek. “Ek is verheug om dit te hoor!”

Harry kan sien dat die nuus vir hom ’n groot slag is. Een van sy name is waardeloos.

“Enige ander?” sê Crouch koud.

“O ja . . . daar was Rosier,” sê Karkaroff gejaag. “Evan Rosier.”

“Rosier is dood,” sê Crouch. “Hy is ook kort na jou gevang. Hy het verkies om hom teen te sit eerder as om oor te gee en is tydens die worsteling gedood.”

“Het ’n stuk van my met hom saamgevat,” fluister Moodie aan Harry se regterkant. Harry kyk weer na hom en sien dat hy die groot gat in sy neus vir Dompeldorius wys.

“Niks – niks minder as wat Rosier verdien het nie!” sê Karkaroff en nou is daar ’n regte klank van paniek in sy stem. Harry kan sien dat hy bekommerd raak dat sy inligting dalk vir die Ministerie waardeloos kan wees. Karkaroff se oë dartel na die deur in die hoek waaragter die Dementors ongetwyfeld nog steeds staan en wag.

“Nog name?” sê Crouch.

“Ja!” sê Karkaroff. “Daar was Thiart – hy het gehelp om die McKinnons te vermoor! Mulciber – hy’t in die Imperiusvloek gespesialiseer, talle mense gedwing om die vreeslikste goed te doen! Rookwood, wat ’n spioen was en vir Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie nuttige inligting vanuit die Ministerie aangedra het!”

Harry kan sien dat Karkaroff ’n aar raak geboor het. Die wagtende skare brom nou almal saam.

“Rookwood?” sê mnr. Crouch en knik vir ’n heks wat voor hom sit en op haar stuk perkament begin skryf. “Augustus Rookwood van die Departement van Geheime?”

“Einste,” sê Karkaroff gretig. “Ek het verneem dat hy ’n hele netwerk van goedgeplaaste towenaars gebruik het om inligting in te samel, sowel binne die Ministerie as daar buite –”

“Thiart en Mulciber het ons,” sê mnr. Crouch. “Goed dan, Karkaroff, as dit al is, sal jy vir eers teruggaan Azkaban toe terwyl ons besluit –”

“Nog nie!” gil Karkaroff wat wanhopig lyk. “Wag, ek het nog!”

Harry kan sien hoe hy in die lig van die fakkels sweet. Sy wit vel steek skerp af teen die swart van sy hare en baard.

“Snerp!” skree hy. “Severus Snerp!”

“Snerp is deur die Raad vrygespreek,” sê Crouch kil. “Albus Dompeldorius het vir hom ingestaan.”

“Nee!” skree Karkaroff en beur teen die kettings wat hom aan die stoel vashou. “Ek verseker julle! Severus Snerp is ’n Doodseter!”

Dompeldorius het orent gekom. “Ek het reeds getuienis oor hierdie aangeleentheid gelewer,” sê hy bedaard. “Severus Snerp was inderdaad ’n Doodseter. Hy het hom egter voor die Heer Woldemort se ondergang aan ons kant geskaar en ’n spioen vir ons geword, iets waarvoor hy groot persoonlike risiko’s geloop het. As hy ’n Doodseter is, is ek ook een.”

Harry draai sodat hy na Maloog Moodie agter Dompeldorius se rug kan kyk. Daar is ’n uitdrukking van die grootste skeptisisme op Moodie se gesig.

“Goed dan, Karkaroff,” sê Crouch koudweg, “jy was van hulp. Ek sal jou saak weer in oënskou neem. Intussen sal jy teruggaan Azkaban toe . . .”

Mnr. Crouch se stem vervaag. Harry kyk om hom; die kerker is besig om te verdwyn asof dit van rook gemaak is; alles word dowwer, hy kan nog net sy eie liggaam sien, verder is alles in duisternis gehul . . .

Toe kom die kerker terug. Nou sit Harry in ’n ander sitplek; steeds op die hoogste bank, maar aan mnr. Crouch se linkerhand. Die atmosfeer is ook anders; ontspanne, amper vrolik. Die hekse en towenaars langs die mure gesels met mekaar amper asof hulle by ’n soort sportbyeenkoms is. ’n Heks halfpad boontoe in die rye banke aan die oorkant trek Harry se aandag. Sy het kort blonde hare, dra ’n pruimrooi kleed en suig aan die punt van ’n heldergroen veerpen. Dit is onmiskenbaar ’n jonger Rika Skinner. Harry kyk om; Dompeldorius sit weer langs hom, maar hy dra ’n ander kleed. Mnr. Crouch lyk moeër en tog ook kwaaiër, meer uitgeteer . . . Harry verstaan. Dit is ’n ander herinnering, ’n ander dag . . . ’n ander verhoor.

Die deur in die hoek gaan oop en Ludo Bagman stap in.

Dit is egter nie ’n Ludo Bagman wat ietwat agteruitgegaan het nie, maar ’n Ludo Bagman wat duidelik op die kruin van sy Kwiddiekloopbaan is. Sy neus is nie gebreek nie; hy is lank en skraal en gespierd. Bagman lyk senuagtig toe hy op die gekettingde stoel gaan sit, maar dit bind hom nie vas soos dit met Karkaroff gemaak het nie en Bagman, wat lyk asof hy moed skep, kyk na die wagtende mense, waai vir ’n paar van hulle en waag ’n klein glimlaggie.

“Ludo Bagman, jy is hierheen gebring om voor die Raad op Magiese Wetgewing te verskyn op aanklagte wat verband hou met die bedrywighede van die Doodseters,” sê mnr. Crouch. “Ons het die getuienis teen jou gehoor en is gereed om uitspraak te lewer. Is daar enigiets wat jy by jou getuienis wil voeg voor ons die vonnis uitspreek?”

Harry kan sy ore nie glo nie. *Ludo Bagman ’n Doodseter?*

“Net,” sê Bagman en hy glimlag ongemaklik, “wel – ek weet ek was so ietwat van ’n idioot –”

’n Paar van die hekse en towenaars in die omringende sitplekke glim-

lag verdraagsaam. Dit lyk nie asof mnr. Crouch hul gevoelens deel nie. Hy staar ernstig na Ludo Bagman met 'n uitdrukking van die grootste erns en minagting op sy gesig.

“Jy het nog nooit 'n waarder woord gesê nie, boet,” brom iemand agter Harry droogweg teenoor Dompeldorius. Harry kyk om en sien dat dit weer Moodie is wat daar sit. “As ek nie geweet het dat hy nog maar altyd 'n bietjie toe was nie, sou ek gesê het daardie Mokkers het sy brein permanent beskadig . . .”

“Ludovic Bagman, jy is betrap waar jy inligting vir die Heer Wolde-mort se ondersteuners gegee het,” sê mnr. Crouch. “Hiervoor stel ek 'n termyn in Azkaban voor van nie korter as –”

Daar klink egter 'n koor van protes vanuit die omringende sitplekke op. Verskeie van die hekse en towenaars wat teen die mure sit, staan op en skud hul koppe en selfs hul vuiste vir mnr. Crouch.

“Maar ek het vir jou gesê dat ek nie geweet het nie!” roep Bagman ernstig bo-oor die skare se lawaai terwyl sy ronde blou oë al groter word. “Hoegenaamd nie! Ou Rookwood was 'n vriend van my pa . . . het nooit kon dink hy is kop in een mus met Jy-Weet-Wie nie! Ek dag ek maak vir ons kant inligting bymekaar! En Rookwood het aanhou sê hoe hy later vir my 'n werk by die Ministerie sal reël . . . wanneer my Kwiddiekdae verby is, jy weet . . . Ek bedoel, ek kan nie vir die res van my lewe vir Mokkers loop en koes nie, kan ek?”

Hier en daar giggel die skare.

“Ons sal tot stemming oorgaan,” sê mnr. Crouch koud. Hy draai na die regterkant van die kerker. “Sal die jurie hul hande opsteek, asseblief . . . diegene ten gunste van gevangenstraf . . .”

Harry kyk na die regterkant van die kerker. Niemand het 'n hand opgesteek nie. Baie van die hekse en towenaars teen die mure begin hande klap. Een van die hekse van die jurie staan op.

“Ja?” blaf mnr. Crouch.

“Ons wil graag vir mnr. Bagman gelukwens met sy voortreflike vertoning vir Engeland in die Kwiddiekwedstryd teen Turkye verlede Saterdag,” sê die heks uitasem.

Mnr. Crouch lyk woedend. Die kerker weergalm onder die toejuiging. Bagman staan op en buig stralend.

“Skandelik,” spoeg mnr. Crouch na Dompeldorius toe hy gaan sit en Bagman uit die kerker loop. “Rookwood vir hom 'n werk beloof, inderdaad . . . die dag dat Ludo Bagman by ons aansluit, sal 'n besonder hartseer dag vir die Ministerie wees . . .”

Weer verdwyn die kerker. Toe dit terugkeer, kyk Harry om hom. Hy en Dompeldorius sit nog steeds langs mnr. Crouch, maar die atmosfeer is totaal anders. Daar heers 'n absolute stilte wat net deur die droë snikke van 'n broos en tenger heks in die sitplek langs mnr. Crouch verbreek

word. Sy hou 'n sakdoek met bewende hande voor haar mond vas. Harry kyk op na Crouch en sien dat hy maerder en gryser as tevore lyk. 'n Se-nuwee spring teen sy slaap.

“Bring hulle in,” sê hy en sy stem eggo deur die stil kerker.

Die deur in die hoek gaan weer oop. Hierdie keer kom ses Dementors saam met 'n groep van vier mense in. Harry sien dat die mense in die skare omdraai om na mnr. Crouch te kyk. 'n Paar van hulle fluister onder mekaar.

Die Dementors laat sit elk van die vier mense in vier stoele met kettings om die arms wat op die kerkervloer staan. Daar is 'n gesette man wat strak na Crouch staar, 'n skraler man wat meer senuagtig lyk en wie se oë oor die skare dartel, 'n vrou met dik, blink, donker hare en swaar ooglede wat in die stoel sit asof dit 'n troon is, en 'n seun in sy laat tiener-jare wat uiters verskrik lyk. Hy bewe, sy strooikleurige hare hang oor sy gesig en sy besproete vel is melkwit. Die tenger heks langs Crouch begin om heen en weer in haar stoel te wieg en jammerlik in haar sakdoek te kerm.

Crouch staan op. Hy kyk af na die vierstuks voor hom en daar is suiwer haat op sy gesig te lees.

“Julle is hier voor die Raad op Magiese Wetgewing gedaag,” sê hy hard, “sodat ons kan oordeel oor 'n misdaad wat so verfoeilik is –”

“Vader,” sê die seun met die strooikleurige hare. “Vader . . . asse-blief . . .”

“– dat ons die gelyke daarvan nog nie in hierdie hof moes aanhoor nie,” sê Crouch en hy praat harder sodat hy sy seun se stem oordonder. “Ons het die getuienis teen julle gehoor. Die vier van julle word beskuldig dat julle 'n Auror gevange geneem het – Frank Loggerenberg – en hom aan die Cruciatusvloek onderwerp het in die geloof dat hy weet waar jul verbanne meester, Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie, hom bevind –”

“Vader, ek het nie!” gil die seun in die kettings. “Ek het nie, ek sweer, Vader, moet my nie na die Dementors toe terugstuur nie –”

“Julle word verder daarvan beskuldig,” bulder mnr. Crouch, “dat julle die Cruciatusvloek op Frank Loggerenberg se vrou toegepas het toe sy nie vir julle inligting wou gee nie. Julle het beplan om Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie se mag te herstel en om die lewens van geweld wat julle waarskynlik gelei het toe hy nog sterk was, voort te sit. Ek vra nou die jurie –”

“Moeder!” skree die seun en die tenger heks langs Crouch begin snik terwyl sy heen en weer wieg. “Moeder, keer hom, Moeder, ek het dit nie gedoen nie, dit was nie ek nie!”

“Ek vra nou die jurie,” skree mnr. Crouch, “om hul hande op te steek as hulle glo, soos ek, dat hierdie misdade 'n lewenslange vonnis in Azkaban verdien.”

Die hekse en towenaars aan die regterkant van die kerker steek hul hande gelyk op. Die mense wat teen die mure sit begin om, soos vir Bagman, hande te klap, maar hul gesigte is vertrek van 'n barbaarse soort triomf. Die seun begin skree.

“Nee! Moeder, nee! Ek het dit nie gedoen nie, ek het nie, ek het nie geweet nie! Moet my nie soontoe stuur nie, moenie dat hy my stuur nie!”

Die Dementors gly terug in die vertrek. Die seun se drie metgeselle staan stil van hul stoele af op; die vrou met die swaar ooglede kyk op na Crouch en roep, “Die Donker Heer sal weer opstaan, Crouch! Gooi ons in Azkaban, ons sal wag! Hy sal verrys en ons kom haal en ons meer as al sy ander volgelinge beloon! Net ons was getrou! Net ons het hom probeer vind!”

Die seun probeer egter om hom teen die Dementors te versit, hoewel Harry kan sien dat hul koue, dreinerende mag hom alreeds begin aantass. Die skare jou hulle uit, party van hulle staande, terwyl die vrou uit die kerker gly en die seun hom nog steeds teensit.

“Ek is jou seun!” skree hy vir Crouch. “Ek is jou seun!”

“Jy is nie my seun nie!” bulder Crouch en sy oë peul skielik uit. “Ek het nie 'n seun nie!”

Die tenger heks langs hom snak na asem en sak inmekaar in haar stoel. Sy het flou geword. Dit lyk nie asof Crouch iets gemerk het nie.

“Neem hulle weg!” brul Crouch vir die Dementors sodat die spoeg uit sy mond spat. “Neem hulle weg en mag hulle daar verrot!”

“Vader! Vader, ek was nie betrokke nie! Nee! Nee! Asseblief, Vader!” “Harry, ek dink dis tyd om terug na my kantoor te gaan,” sê 'n sagte stem in Harry se oor.

Harry staar. Hy kyk om hom rond. Dan kyk hy na sy ander kant.

Daar is 'n Albus Dompeldorius aan sy regterkant wat sit en kyk hoe Crouch se seun deur die Dementors weggesleep word – en daar is ook 'n Albus Dompeldorius aan sy linkerkant wat reguit na hom kyk.

“Kom,” sê die Dompeldorius links van hom en hy sit sy hand onder Harry se elmboog. Harry voel hoe hy opstyg; die kerker smelt onder hom weg; vir 'n oomblik is alles swart en dan voel dit asof hy in stadige aksie bollemakiesie slaan en skielik plat op sy voete in die verblindende lig van Dompeldorius se sonnige kantoor te lande kom. Die klipkom glim in die kas voor hom en Albus Dompeldorius staan langs hom.

“Professor,” hyg Harry, “ek weet ek moes nie – ek het nie bedoel – die kas se deur was oop en –”

“Ek verstaan heeltemal,” sê Dompeldorius. Hy tel die kom op, dra dit na sy lessenaar, sit dit op die gepoleerde oppervlak neer en gaan sit in sy stoel agter die lessenaar. Hy beduie dat Harry oorkant hom moet gaan sit.

Harry maak so en staar na die klipkom. Die inhoud het teruggekeer na die oorspronklike silwerwit toestand en dit warrel en rimpel voor sy oë.

“Wat is dit?” vra Harry bewering.

“Dit? Dit is ’n Peinssif,” sê Dompeldorius. “Ek vind partykeer, en ek is seker jy ken die gevoel, dat daar te veel gedagtes en herinnerings in my brein saamgedruk is.”

“H’m,” sê Harry, wat nie in alle eerlikheid kan sê dat hy al ooit so gevoel het nie.

“Dit is sulke tye,” sê Dompeldorius terwyl hy na die klipkom wys, “dat ek die Peinssif gebruik. ’n Mens tap bloot die oortollige gedagtes uit jou brein, giet dit in die kom en bepeins dit later wanneer jy tyd het. Dit is baie makliker om patrone en skakels te sien, weet jy, wanneer hulle in hierdie vorm is.”

“U bedoel . . . hierdie goed is u *gedagtes*?” sê Harry terwyl hy na die kolkende wit stof in die kom kyk.

“Sekerlik,” sê Dompeldorius. “Kom ek wys jou.”

Dompeldorius haal sy towerstaf uit die binnekant van sy kleed en steek die punt naby sy slaap tussen sy silwer hare in. Toe hy die towerstaf wegneem, lyk dit asof daar hare aan kleef – maar dan sien Harry dat dit in der waarheid ’n glinsterende string van dieselfde vreemde, silwerwit stof is wat in die Peinssif is. Dompeldorius plaas hierdie vars gedagte ook in die kom en Harry sien tot sy verbasing dat sy eie gesig op die oppervlak van die kom swem.

Dompeldorius plaas sy lang hande aan weerskante van die Peinssif en skud dit, baie soos ’n prospekterder wat na stukkies goud soek . . . Dan sien Harry hoe sy eie gesig gladweg in Snerp s’n verander wat sy mond oopmaak en met die plafon praat sodat sy stem effens eggo. “Dit kom terug . . . Karkaroff s’n ook . . . sterker en helderder as ooit . . .”

“’n Verband wat ek sonder hulp sou kon aflei,” sug Dompeldorius, “maar nietemin.” Hy staar oor die bokant van sy halfmaanbrilglase na Harry wat op sy beurt na Snerp se gesig staar wat nog steeds in die kom ronddraai. “Ek het die Peinssif gebruik toe mnr. Broddelwerk vir ons vergadering opgedaag het en dit ietwat haastig teruggesit. Ek het die kas se deur ongetwyfeld nie deeglik toegemaak nie. Natuurlik sou dit jou aandag getrek het.”

“Ek is jammer,” mompel Harry.

Dompeldorius skud sy kop.

“Nuuskierigheid is nie ’n sonde nie,” sê hy, “maar ons moet versigtig wees met ons nuuskierigheid . . . ja, inderdaad . . .”

Hy frons effens en roer die gedagtes in die kom met die punt van sy towerstaf. Onmiddellik verrys ’n figuur daaruit, ’n mollige meisie van so sestien wat onvergenoeg lyk en stadig, haar voete nog in die kom, in die rondte begin draai. Sy steur haar glad nie aan Harry of professor Dompeldorius nie. Toe sy praat, eggo haar stem soos Snerp s’n gemaak het, asof dit uit die dieptes van die klipkom na bo styg. “Hy het my getoor, pro-

fessor Dompeldorius, en ek het hom net geterg, meneer, ek het net gesê ek het gesien hoe hy vir Florence verlede Donderdag agter die kweekhuise gesoen het . . .”

“Maar hoekom, Bertha,” sê Dompeldorius treurig terwyl hy na die draaiende meisie, wat nou stilbly, kyk, “hoekom het jy hom in die eerste plek gevolg?”

“Bertha?” fluister Harry terwyl hy na haar kyk. “Is dit – was dit Bertha Jurgens?”

“Ja,” sê Dompeldorius terwyl hy die gedagtes in die kom weer aanpor; Bertha sink terug daarin en hulle word weer eens silwerig en ondeursigtig. “Dit was Bertha soos ek haar op skool onthou.”

Die silwerige lig in die Peinssif verlig Dompeldorius se gesig en dit tref Harry skielik hoe oud hy lyk. Hy weet natuurlik dat Dompeldorius aanstap in jare, maar om die een of ander rede het hy Dompeldorius nog nooit as ’n ou man beskou nie.

“Wel, Harry,” sê Dompeldorius sag, “voor jy in my gedagtes verlore geraak het, was daar iets wat jy vir my wou sê?”

“Ja,” sê Harry. “Professor – ek was nou net in Waarsêery en – h’m – ek het aan die slaap geraak.”

Hy aarsel terwyl hy wonder of hy tereggewys gaan word, maar Dompeldorius sê bloot, “Heeltemal verstaanbaar. Gaan voort.”

“Wel, ek het gedroom,” sê Harry. “’n Droom oor die Heer Woldemort. Hy het vir Wurmstert gemartel . . . u weet wie Wurmstert –”

“Ek weet,” sê Dompeldorius dadelik. “Gaan asseblief voort.”

“Woldemort het ’n brief per uil gekry. Hy’t iets gesê soos dat Wurmstert se flater herstel is. Hy’t gesê dat iemand dood is. Toe het hy gesê dat Wurmstert nie vir die slang gevoer gaan word nie – daar was ’n slang langs sy stoel. Hy’t gesê – hy’t gesê dat hy my in sy plek vir hom gaan voer. Toe het hy die Cruciatusvloek op Wurmstert toegepas – en my litteken het gepyn,” sê Harry. “Dit het my laat wakker word so erg was dit.”

Dompeldorius kyk bloot na hom.

“H’m – dis al,” sê Harry.

“Ek sien,” sê Dompeldorius stilweg. “Ek sien. Sê my, het jou litteken vanjaar by enige ander geleentheid gepyn behalwe die keer in die vakansie toe dit jou wakker gemaak het?”

“Nee, ek – hoe’t u geweet dat dit my in die somervakansie wakker gemaak het?” sê Harry verbaas.

“Jy is nie Sirius se enigste korrespondent nie,” sê Dompeldorius. “Ek hou ook kontak met hom sedert hy verlede jaar hier by Hogwarts weg is. Dit was ek wat die grot in die berg vir hom voorgestel het as die veiligste plek om in te bly.”

Dompeldorius staan op en begin om op en af agter sy lessenaar te stap. Hy hou die punt van sy towerstaf elke nou en dan teen sy slaap, verwyder

nog 'n blink gedagte en sit dit in die Peinssif. Die gedagtes daar binne-in kolk nou so vinnig dat Harry niks kan uitmaak nie; dit is 'n blote warreling van kleur.

“Professor?” vra hy 'n rukkie later gedemp.

Dompeldorius kom tot stilstand en kyk na Harry.

“Verskoon my,” sê hy sag. Hy gaan sit weer agter sy lessenaar.

“Weet u – weet u hoekom my litteken seer is?”

Vir 'n oomblik kyk Dompeldorius baie intens na Harry en dan sê hy, “Ek het 'n teorie, niks meer as dit nie . . . Ek reken dat jou litteken pyn elke keer dat die Heer Woldemort na aan jou is en ook wanneer hy besonder hatig teenoor jou voel.”

“Maar . . . hoekom?”

“Omdat jy en hy deur die vloek wat misluk het, verbind word,” sê Dompeldorius. “Dis nie 'n gewone litteken nie.”

“Dan dink u . . . dat die droom . . . dat dit regtig gebeur het?”

“Dit is moontlik,” sê Dompeldorius. “Ek sou sê – waarskynlik. Harry – het jy vir Woldemort gesien?”

“Nee,” sê Harry. “Net die agterkant van sy stoel. Maar – daar kan nie juis iets wees om te sien nie, of kan daar? Ek bedoel, hy het nie 'n liggaam nie, hè? Maar . . . maar hoe kan hy dan 'n towerstaf vashou?” sê Harry stadig.

“Hoe inderdaad?” prewel Dompeldorius. “Hoe inderdaad . . .”

Vir 'n rukkie praat nóg Dompeldorius, nóg Harry. Dompeldorius staar oor die vertrek terwyl hy die punt van sy towerstaf elke nou en dan teen sy slaap hou en nog blink, silwer gedagtes by die siedende massa in die Peinssif voeg.

“Professor,” sê Harry uiteindelik, “dink u dat hy besig is om sterker te word?”

“Woldemort?” sê Dompeldorius terwyl hy oor die Peinssif na Harry kyk. Dit is die kenmerkende, priemende blik wat Dompeldorius al by ander geleenthede gebruik het en wat Harry altyd laat voel dat hy dwarsdeur hom sien, op 'n manier wat Moodie se oog hom nie kan nadoen nie. “Weer eens, Harry, kan ek net sê wat ek vermoed.”

Dompeldorius sug weer en hy lyk ouer en moeër as ooit.

“Die jare van Woldemort se magsopkoms,” sê hy, “was gekenmerk deur verdwynings. Bertha Jurgens het op die plek verdwyn waar ons oortuig is Woldemort laas was. Mnr. Crouch het ook verdwyn . . . op hierdie einste terrein. Daar was ook 'n derde verdwyning, een wat die Ministerie, en dit spyt my om dit te moet sê, as onbelangrik beskou omdat dit 'n Moggel was. Sy naam was Frank Bryce, hy het in die dorpie gewoon waar Woldemort se pa grootgeword het en hy is sedert verlede Augustus nog nie weer gesien nie. Jy sien, ek lees die Moggelkoerante, anders as die meeste van my vriende by die Ministerie.”

Dompeldorius kyk weer baie ernstig na Harry. “Dit lyk vir my asof hierdie verdwynings met mekaar verband hou. Die Ministerie verskil van my – soos jy dalk gehoor het toe jy buite my kantoor gewag het.”

Harry knik. Dit word weer stil tussen hulle en Dompeldorius haal nog steeds nou en dan gedagtes uit. Dit voel vir Harry asof hy moet gaan, maar sy nuuskierigheid hou hom daar.

“Professor?” sê hy weer.

“Ja, Harry?” sê Dompeldorius.

“H’m . . . kan ek u vra oor . . . daardie hofding waarin ek was . . . daar in die Peinssif?”

“Jy kan,” sê Dompeldorius swaar. “Ek het dit al baie keer bygewoon, maar sommige verhore kom helderder terug as andere . . . veral nou . . .”

“Onthou u – onthou u die verhoor toe u my gekry het? Die een met mnr. Crouch se seun? Wel . . . was dit Neville se ouers oor wie hulle gepraat het?”

Dompeldorius kyk baie skerp na Harry.

“Het Neville nog nooit vir julle vertel waarom sy ouma hom grootmaak nie?” sê hy.

Harry skud sy kop en terwyl hy dit doen, wonder hy hoekom hy, in die amper vier jaar dat hy Neville ken, hom nog nooit gevra het nie.

“Ja, hulle het oor Neville se ouers gepraat,” sê Dompeldorius. “Sy pa, Frank, was ’n Auror net soos professor Moodie. Hy en sy vrou is gemartel vir inligting oor Woldemort se verblyfplek na hy sy magte verloor het, net soos jy daar gehoor het.”

“Dan is hulle dood?” vra Harry sag.

“Nee,” sê Dompeldorius en sy stem is vol van ’n bitterheid wat Harry nog nooit tevore by hom gehoor het nie, “hulle is kranksinnig. Hulle is albei in Sint Mungo se Hospitaal vir Magiese Kwinte en Kwale. Ek verneem dat Neville hulle saam met sy ouma tydens die vakansies besoek. Hulle herken hom nie.”

Harry is vol afgryse soos hy daar sit. Hy het nooit geweet nie . . . nooit in vier jaar eens die moeite gedoen om uit te vind nie . . .

“Die Loggerenbergs was baie gewild,” sê Dompeldorius. “Die aanvalle op hulle het na Woldemort se ondergang gekom, net toe almal gedink het dat hulle veilig is. Daardie aanrandings het ’n golf van woede tot gevolg gehad soos ek nog nooit tevore teengekom het nie. Die Ministerie was onder geweldige druk om die skuldiges te vang. Ongelukkig was die Loggerenbergs se getuienis – in die lig van hul toestand – nie juis betroubaar nie.”

“Dan was mnr. Crouch se seun dalk nie betrokke nie?” sê Harry stadig. Dompeldorius skud sy kop. “Dit weet ek nie.”

Weer eens sit Harry stil en kyk hoe die inhoud van die Peinssif in die rondte draai. Daar is nog twee vrae wat hy brand om te vra . . . maar hulle hou verband met die aandadigheid van mense wat nog lewe . . .

“H’m,” sê hy, “mnr. Bagman . . .”

“ . . . is nog nooit sedertdien van enige Donker aktiwiteite beskuldig nie,” sê Dompeldorius bedaard.

“Reg,” sê Harry vinnig terwyl hy weer na die inhoud van die Peinssif staar wat al stadiger draai noudat Dompeldorius nie meer gedagtes byvoeg nie. “En . . . h’m . . .”

Dis egter asof die Peinssif die vraag namens hom vra. Snerp se gesig swem weer op die oppervlak. Dompeldorius kyk daarna en dan op na Harry.

“So ook nie professor Snerp nie,” sê hy.

Harry kyk in Dompeldorius se ligblou oë en voor hy homself kan keer, tuimel die ding wat hy eintlik wil weet oor sy lippe. “Wat laat u dink dat hy nie meer vir Woldemort ondersteun nie, professor?”

Dompeldorius hou Harry se blik vir ’n paar sekondes gevange en dan sê hy, “Dit, Harry, is ’n saak tussen my en professor Snerp.”

Harry weet dat die onderhoud verby is; Dompeldorius lyk nie kwaad nie, maar daar is ’n finaliteit in sy stem wat vir hom sê dat dit tyd is om te gaan. Hy staan op en so ook Dompeldorius.

“Harry,” sê hy toe Harry by die deur kom. “Moet asseblief nie oor Neville se ouers met enigiemand anders praat nie. Dit is sy reg om mense te sê wanneer hy daarvoor gereed is.”

“Ja, professor,” sê Harry toe hy omdraai om uit te stap.

“En –”

Harry kyk terug.

Dompeldorius staan gebukkend oor die Peinssif, sy gesig word van onder af deur die silwer kolle verlig sodat hy ouer as ooit lyk. Vir ’n oomblik staar hy na Harry en dan sê hy, “Sterkte met die derde taak.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



THE THIRD TASK

Dumbledore reckons You-Know-Who's getting stronger again as well?" Ron whispered.

Everything Harry had seen in the Pensieve, nearly everything Dumbledore had told and shown him afterward, he had now shared with Ron and Hermione — and, of course, with Sirius, to whom Harry had sent an owl the moment he had left Dumbledore's office. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat up late in the common room once again that night, talking it all over until Harry's mind was reeling, until he understood what Dumbledore had meant about a head becoming so full of thoughts that it would have been a relief to siphon them off.

Ron stared into the common room fire. Harry thought he saw Ron shiver slightly, even though the evening was warm.

“And he trusts Snape?” Ron said. “He really trusts Snape, even though he knows he was a Death Eater?”

“Yes,” said Harry.

Hermione had not spoken for ten minutes. She was sitting with her forehead in her hands, staring at her knees. Harry thought she too looked as though she could have done with a Pensieve.

“Rita Skeeter,” she muttered finally.

“How can you be worrying about her now?” said Ron, in utter disbelief.

“I’m not worrying about her,” Hermione said to her knees. “I’m just thinking . . . remember what she said to me in the Three Broomsticks? ‘I know things about Ludo Bagman that would make your hair curl.’ This is what she meant, isn’t it? She reported his trial, she knew he’d passed information to the Death Eaters. And Winky too, remember . . . ‘Ludo Bagman’s a bad wizard.’ Mr. Crouch would have been furious he got off, he would have talked about it at home.”

“Yeah, but Bagman didn’t pass information on purpose, did he?”

Hermione shrugged.

“And Fudge reckons *Madame Maxime* attacked Crouch?” Ron said, turning back to Harry.

“Yeah,” said Harry, “but he’s only saying that because Crouch disappeared near the Beauxbatons carriage.”

“We never thought of her, did we?” said Ron slowly. “Mind you, she’s definitely got giant blood, and she doesn’t want to admit it —”

“Of course she doesn’t,” said Hermione sharply, looking up.

“Look what happened to Hagrid when Rita found out about his mother. Look at Fudge, jumping to conclusions about her, just because she’s part giant. Who needs that sort of prejudice? I’d probably say I had big bones if I knew that’s what I’d get for telling the truth.”

Hermione looked at her watch. “We haven’t done any practicing!” she said, looking shocked. “We were going to do the Impediment Curse! We’ll have to really get down to it tomorrow! Come on, Harry, you need to get some sleep.”

Harry and Ron went slowly upstairs to their dormitory. As Harry pulled on his pajamas, he looked over at Neville’s bed. True to his word to Dumbledore, he had not told Ron and Hermione about Neville’s parents. As Harry took off his glasses and climbed into his four-poster, he imagined how it must feel to have parents still living but unable to recognize you. He often got sympathy from strangers for being an orphan, but as he listened to Neville’s snores, he thought that Neville deserved it more than he did. Lying in the darkness, Harry felt a rush of anger and hate toward the people who had tortured Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom. . . . He remembered the jeers of the crowd as Crouch’s son and his companions had been dragged from the court by the dementors. . . . He understood how they had felt. . . . Then he remembered the milk-white face of the screaming boy and realized with a jolt that he had died a year later. . . .

It was Voldemort, Harry thought, staring up at the canopy of his bed in the darkness, it all came back to Voldemort. . . . He was the one who had torn these families apart, who had ruined all these lives. . . .

Ron and Hermione were supposed to be studying for their exams, which would finish on the day of the third task, but they were putting most of their efforts into helping Harry prepare.

“Don’t worry about it,” Hermione said shortly when Harry pointed this out to them and said he didn’t mind practicing on his own for a while, “at least we’ll get top marks in Defense Against the Dark Arts. We’d never have found out about all these hexes in class.”

“Good training for when we’re all Aurors,” said Ron excitedly, attempting the Impediment Curse on a wasp that had buzzed into the room and making it stop dead in midair.

The mood in the castle as they entered June became excited and tense again. Everyone was looking forward to the third task, which would take place a week before the end of term. Harry was practicing hexes at every available moment. He felt more confident about this task than either of the others. Difficult and dangerous though it would undoubtedly be, Moody was right: Harry had managed to find his way past monstrous creatures and enchanted barriers before now, and this time he had some notice, some chance to prepare himself for what lay ahead.

Tired of walking in on Harry, Hermione, and Ron all over the school, Professor McGonagall had given them permission to use the empty Transfiguration classroom at lunchtimes. Harry had soon mastered the Impediment Curse, a spell to slow down and obstruct attackers; the Reductor Curse, which would enable him to blast solid objects out of his way; and the Four-Point Spell, a useful discovery of Hermione’s that would make his wand point due north, therefore enabling him to check whether he was going in the right direction

within the maze. He was still having trouble with the Shield Charm, though. This was supposed to cast a temporary, invisible wall around himself that deflected minor curses; Hermione managed to shatter it with a well-placed Jelly-Legs Jinx, and Harry wobbled around the room for ten minutes afterward before she had looked up the counter-jinx.

“You’re still doing really well, though,” Hermione said encouragingly, looking down her list and crossing off those spells they had already learned. “Some of these are bound to come in handy.”

“Come and look at this,” said Ron, who was standing by the window. He was staring down onto the grounds. “What’s Malfoy doing?”

Harry and Hermione went to see. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were standing in the shadow of a tree below. Crabbe and Goyle seemed to be keeping a lookout; both were smirking. Malfoy was holding his hand up to his mouth and speaking into it.

“He looks like he’s using a walkie-talkie,” said Harry curiously.

“He can’t be,” said Hermione, “I’ve told you, those sorts of things don’t work around Hogwarts. Come on, Harry,” she added briskly, turning away from the window and moving back into the middle of the room, “let’s try that Shield Charm again.”

Sirius was sending daily owls now. Like Hermione, he seemed to want to concentrate on getting Harry through the last task before they concerned themselves with anything else. He reminded Harry in every letter that whatever might be going on outside the walls of

Hogwarts was not Harry's responsibility, nor was it within his power to influence it.

If Voldemort is really getting stronger again, he wrote, my priority is to ensure your safety. He cannot hope to lay hands on you while you are under Dumbledore's protection, but all the same, take no risks: Concentrate on getting through that maze safely, and then we can turn our attention to other matters.

Harry's nerves mounted as June the twenty-fourth drew closer, but they were not as bad as those he had felt before the first and second tasks. For one thing, he was confident that, this time, he had done everything in his power to prepare for the task. For another, this was the final hurdle, and however well or badly he did, the tournament would at last be over, which would be an enormous relief.

Breakfast was a very noisy affair at the Gryffindor table on the morning of the third task. The post owls appeared, bringing Harry a good-luck card from Sirius. It was only a piece of parchment, folded over and bearing a muddy paw print on its front, but Harry appreciated it all the same. A screech owl arrived for Hermione, carrying her morning copy of the *Daily Prophet* as usual. She unfolded the paper, glanced at the front page, and spat out a mouthful of pumpkin juice all over it.

"What?" said Harry and Ron together, staring at her.

"Nothing," said Hermione quickly, trying to shove the paper out of sight, but Ron grabbed it. He stared at the headline and said, "No

way. Not today. That old *cow*.”

“What?” said Harry. “Rita Skeeter again?”

“No,” said Ron, and just like Hermione, he attempted to push the paper out of sight.

“It’s about me, isn’t it?” said Harry.

“No,” said Ron, in an entirely unconvincing tone.

But before Harry could demand to see the paper, Draco Malfoy shouted across the Great Hall from the Slytherin table.

“Hey, Potter! *Potter!* How’s your head? You feeling all right? Sure you’re not going to go berserk on us?”

Malfoy was holding a copy of the *Daily Prophet* too. Slytherins up and down the table were sniggering, twisting in their seats to see Harry’s reaction.

“Let me see it,” Harry said to Ron. “Give it here.”

Very reluctantly, Ron handed over the newspaper. Harry turned it over and found himself staring at his own picture, beneath the banner headline:

HARRY POTTER

“DISTURBED AND DANGEROUS”

The boy who defeated He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is unstable and possibly dangerous, *writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent*. Alarming evidence has recently come to light about Harry Potter’s strange behavior, which casts doubts upon his suitability to compete in a demanding competition like the Triwizard Tournament, or even to attend Hogwarts School.

Potter, the *Daily Prophet* can exclusively reveal, regularly collapses at school, and is often heard to complain of pain in the scar on his forehead (relic of the curse with which You-Know-Who attempted to kill him). On Monday last, midway through a Divination lesson, your *Daily Prophet* reporter witnessed Potter storming from the class, claiming that his scar was hurting too badly to continue studying.

It is possible, say top experts at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, that Potter's brain was affected by the attack inflicted upon him by You-Know-Who, and that his insistence that the scar is still hurting is an expression of his deep-seated confusion.

"He might even be pretending," said one specialist. "This could be a plea for attention."

The *Daily Prophet*, however, has unearthed worrying facts about Harry Potter that Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts, has carefully concealed from the Wizarding public.

"Potter can speak Parseltongue," reveals Draco Malfoy, a Hogwarts fourth year. "There were a lot of attacks on students a couple of years ago, and most people thought Potter was behind them after they saw him lose his temper at a dueling club and set a snake on another boy. It was all hushed up, though. But he's made friends with werewolves and giants too. We think he'd do anything for a bit of power."

Parseltongue, the ability to converse with snakes, has long been considered a Dark Art. Indeed, the most famous Parselmouth of our times is none other than You-Know-Who himself. A member of the Dark Force Defense League, who wished to remain unnamed, stated that he would regard any wizard who could speak Parseltongue “as worthy of investigation. Personally, I would be highly suspicious of anybody who could converse with snakes, as serpents are often used in the worst kinds of Dark Magic, and are historically associated with evildoers.” Similarly, “anyone who seeks out the company of such vicious creatures as werewolves and giants would appear to have a fondness for violence.”

Albus Dumbledore should surely consider whether a boy such as this should be allowed to compete in the Triwizard Tournament. Some fear that Potter might resort to the Dark Arts in his desperation to win the tournament, the third task of which takes place this evening.

“Gone off me a bit, hasn’t she?” said Harry lightly, folding up the paper.

Over at the Slytherin table, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were laughing at him, tapping their heads with their fingers, pulling grotesquely mad faces, and wagging their tongues like snakes.

“How did she know your scar hurt in Divination?” Ron said. “There’s no way she was there, there’s no way she could’ve heard
—”

“The window was open,” said Harry. “I opened it to breathe.”

“You were at the top of North Tower!” Hermione said. “Your voice couldn’t have carried all the way down to the grounds!”

“Well, you’re the one who’s supposed to be researching magical methods of bugging!” said Harry. “You tell me how she did it!”

“I’ve been trying!” said Hermione. “But I . . . but . . .”

An odd, dreamy expression suddenly came over Hermione’s face. She slowly raised a hand and ran her fingers through her hair.

“Are you all right?” said Ron, frowning at her.

“Yes,” said Hermione breathlessly. She ran her fingers through her hair again, and then held her hand up to her mouth, as though speaking into an invisible walkie-talkie. Harry and Ron stared at each other.

“I’ve had an idea,” Hermione said, gazing into space. “I think I know . . . because then no one would be able to see . . . even Moody . . . and she’d have been able to get onto the window ledge . . . but she’s not allowed . . . she’s *definitely* not allowed . . . I think we’ve got her! Just give me two seconds in the library — just to make sure!”

With that, Hermione seized her school bag and dashed out of the Great Hall.

“Oi!” Ron called after her. “We’ve got our History of Magic exam in ten minutes! Blimey,” he said, turning back to Harry, “she must really hate that Skeeter woman to risk missing the start of an exam. What’re you going to do in Binns’s class — read again?”

Exempt from the end-of-term tests as a Triwizard champion, Harry had been sitting in the back of every exam class so far, looking up fresh hexes for the third task.

“S’pose so,” Harry said to Ron; but just then, Professor McGonagall came walking alongside the Gryffindor table toward him.

“Potter, the champions are congregating in the chamber off the Hall after breakfast,” she said.

“But the task’s not till tonight!” said Harry, accidentally spilling scrambled eggs down his front, afraid he had mistaken the time.

“I’m aware of that, Potter,” she said. “The champions’ families are invited to watch the final task, you know. This is simply a chance for you to greet them.”

She moved away. Harry gaped after her.

“She doesn’t expect the Dursleys to turn up, does she?” he asked Ron blankly.

“Dunno,” said Ron. “Harry, I’d better hurry, I’m going to be late for Binns. See you later.”

Harry finished his breakfast in the emptying Great Hall. He saw Fleur Delacour get up from the Ravenclaw table and join Cedric as he crossed to the side chamber and entered. Krum slouched off to join them shortly afterward. Harry stayed where he was. He really didn’t want to go into the chamber. He had no family — no family who would turn up to see him risk his life, anyway. But just as he was getting up, thinking that he might as well go up to the library and do a spot more hex research, the door of the side chamber opened, and Cedric stuck his head out.

“Harry, come on, they’re waiting for you!”

Utterly perplexed, Harry got up. The Dursleys couldn’t possibly be here, could they? He walked across the Hall and opened the door

into the chamber.

Cedric and his parents were just inside the door. Viktor Krum was over in a corner, conversing with his dark-haired mother and father in rapid Bulgarian. He had inherited his father's hooked nose. On the other side of the room, Fleur was jabbering away in French to her mother. Fleur's little sister, Gabrielle, was holding her mother's hand. She waved at Harry, who waved back, grinning. Then he saw Mrs. Weasley and Bill standing in front of the fireplace, beaming at him.

"Surprise!" Mrs. Weasley said excitedly as he smiled broadly and walked over to them. "Thought we'd come and watch you, Harry!" She bent down and kissed him on the cheek.

"You all right?" said Bill, grinning at Harry and shaking his hand. "Charlie wanted to come, but he couldn't get time off. He said you were incredible against the Horntail."

Fleur Delacour, Harry noticed, was eyeing Bill with great interest over her mother's shoulder. Harry could tell she had no objection whatsoever to long hair or earrings with fangs on them.

"This is really nice of you," Harry muttered to Mrs. Weasley. "I thought for a moment — the Dursleys —"

"Hmm," said Mrs. Weasley, pursing her lips. She had always refrained from criticizing the Dursleys in front of Harry, but her eyes flashed every time they were mentioned.

"It's great being back here," said Bill, looking around the chamber (Violet, the Fat Lady's friend, winked at him from her frame). "Haven't seen this place for five years. Is that picture of the mad knight still around? Sir Cadogan?"

“Oh yeah,” said Harry, who had met Sir Cadogan the previous year.

“And the Fat Lady?” said Bill.

“She was here in my time,” said Mrs. Weasley. “She gave me such a telling off one night when I got back to the dormitory at four in the morning —”

“What were you doing out of your dormitory at four in the morning?” said Bill, surveying his mother with amazement.

Mrs. Weasley grinned, her eyes twinkling.

“Your father and I had been for a nighttime stroll,” she said. “He got caught by Apollyon Pringle — he was the caretaker in those days — your father’s still got the marks.”

“Fancy giving us a tour, Harry?” said Bill.

“Yeah, okay,” said Harry, and they made their way back toward the door into the Great Hall. As they passed Amos Diggory, he looked around.

“There you are, are you?” he said, looking Harry up and down. “Bet you’re not feeling quite as full of yourself now Cedric’s caught you up on points, are you?”

“What?” said Harry.

“Ignore him,” said Cedric in a low voice to Harry, frowning after his father. “He’s been angry ever since Rita Skeeter’s article about the Triwizard Tournament — you know, when she made out you were the only Hogwarts champion.”

“Didn’t bother to correct her, though, did he?” said Amos Diggory, loudly enough for Harry to hear as he started to walk out of the door with Mrs. Weasley and Bill. “Still . . . you’ll show him, Ced. Beaten

him once before, haven't you?"

"Rita Skeeter goes out of her way to cause trouble, Amos!" Mrs. Weasley said angrily. "I would have thought you'd know that, working at the Ministry!"

Mr. Diggory looked as though he was going to say something angry, but his wife laid a hand on his arm, and he merely shrugged and turned away.

Harry had a very enjoyable morning walking over the sunny grounds with Bill and Mrs. Weasley, showing them the Beauxbatons carriage and the Durmstrang ship. Mrs. Weasley was intrigued by the Whomping Willow, which had been planted after she had left school, and reminisced at length about the gamekeeper before Hagrid, a man called Ogg.

"How's Percy?" Harry asked as they walked around the greenhouses.

"Not good," said Bill.

"He's very upset," said Mrs. Weasley, lowering her voice and glancing around. "The Ministry wants to keep Mr. Crouch's disappearance quiet, but Percy's been hauled in for questioning about the instructions Mr. Crouch has been sending in. They seem to think there's a chance they weren't genuinely written by him. Percy's been under a lot of strain. They're not letting him fill in for Mr. Crouch as the fifth judge tonight. Cornelius Fudge is going to be doing it."

They returned to the castle for lunch.

"Mum — Bill!" said Ron, looking stunned, as he joined the Gryffindor table. "What're you doing here?"

"Come to watch Harry in the last task!" said Mrs. Weasley

brightly. “I must say, it makes a lovely change, not having to cook. How was your exam?”

“Oh . . . okay,” said Ron. “Couldn’t remember all the goblin rebels’ names, so I invented a few. It’s all right,” he said, helping himself to a Cornish pasty, while Mrs. Weasley looked stern, “they’re all called stuff like Bodrod the Bearded and Urg the Unclean; it wasn’t hard.”

Fred, George, and Ginny came to sit next to them too, and Harry was having such a good time he felt almost as though he were back at the Burrow; he had forgotten to worry about that evening’s task, and not until Hermione turned up, halfway through lunch, did he remember that she had had a brainwave about Rita Skeeter.

“Are you going to tell us — ?”

Hermione shook her head warningly and glanced at Mrs. Weasley.

“Hello, Hermione,” said Mrs. Weasley, much more stiffly than usual.

“Hello,” said Hermione, her smile faltering at the cold expression on Mrs. Weasley’s face.

Harry looked between them, then said, “Mrs. Weasley, you didn’t believe that rubbish Rita Skeeter wrote in *Witch Weekly*, did you? Because Hermione’s not my girlfriend.”

“Oh!” said Mrs. Weasley. “No — of course I didn’t!”

But she became considerably warmer toward Hermione after that.

Harry, Bill, and Mrs. Weasley whiled away the afternoon with a long walk around the castle, and then returned to the Great Hall for the evening feast. Ludo Bagman and Cornelius Fudge had joined the staff table now. Bagman looked quite cheerful, but Cornelius Fudge,

who was sitting next to Madame Maxime, looked stern and was not talking. Madame Maxime was concentrating on her plate, and Harry thought her eyes looked red. Hagrid kept glancing along the table at her.

There were more courses than usual, but Harry, who was starting to feel really nervous now, didn't eat much. As the enchanted ceiling overhead began to fade from blue to a dusky purple, Dumbledore rose to his feet at the staff table, and silence fell.

"Ladies and gentlemen, in five minutes' time, I will be asking you to make your way down to the Quidditch field for the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament. Will the champions please follow Mr. Bagman down to the stadium now."

Harry got up. The Gryffindors all along the table were applauding him; the Weasleys and Hermione all wished him good luck, and he headed off out of the Great Hall with Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor.

"Feeling all right, Harry?" Bagman asked as they went down the stone steps onto the grounds. "Confident?"

"I'm okay," said Harry. It was sort of true; he was nervous, but he kept running over all the hexes and spells he had been practicing in his mind as they walked, and the knowledge that he could remember them all made him feel better.

They walked onto the Quidditch field, which was now completely unrecognizable. A twenty-foot-high hedge ran all the way around the edge of it. There was a gap right in front of them: the entrance to the vast maze. The passage beyond it looked dark and creepy.

Five minutes later, the stands had begun to fill; the air was full of excited voices and the rumbling of feet as the hundreds of students

filed into their seats. The sky was a deep, clear blue now, and the first stars were starting to appear. Hagrid, Professor Moody, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Flitwick came walking into the stadium and approached Bagman and the champions. They were wearing large, red, luminous stars on their hats, all except Hagrid, who had his on the back of his moleskin vest.

“We are going to be patrolling the outside of the maze,” said Professor McGonagall to the champions. “If you get into difficulty, and wish to be rescued, send red sparks into the air, and one of us will come and get you, do you understand?”

The champions nodded.

“Off you go, then!” said Bagman brightly to the four patrollers.

“Good luck, Harry,” Hagrid whispered, and the four of them walked away in different directions, to station themselves around the maze. Bagman now pointed his wand at his throat, muttered, “*Sonorus*,” and his magically magnified voice echoed into the stands.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament is about to begin! Let me remind you how the points currently stand! Tied in first place, with eighty-five points each — Mr. Cedric Diggory and Mr. Harry Potter, both of Hogwarts School!” The cheers and applause sent birds from the Forbidden Forest fluttering into the darkening sky. “In second place, with eighty points — Mr. Viktor Krum, of Durmstrang Institute!” More applause. “And in third place — Miss Fleur Delacour, of Beauxbatons Academy!”

Harry could just make out Mrs. Weasley, Bill, Ron, and Hermione applauding Fleur politely, halfway up the stands. He waved up at

them, and they waved back, beaming at him.

“So . . . on my whistle, Harry and Cedric!” said Bagman. “Three — two — one —”

He gave a short blast on his whistle, and Harry and Cedric hurried forward into the maze.

The towering hedges cast black shadows across the path, and, whether because they were so tall and thick or because they had been enchanted, the sound of the surrounding crowd was silenced the moment they entered the maze. Harry felt almost as though he were underwater again. He pulled out his wand, muttered, “*Lumos*,” and heard Cedric do the same just behind him.

After about fifty yards, they reached a fork. They looked at each other.

“See you,” Harry said, and he took the left one, while Cedric took the right.

Harry heard Bagman’s whistle for the second time. Krum had entered the maze. Harry sped up. His chosen path seemed completely deserted. He turned right, and hurried on, holding his wand high over his head, trying to see as far ahead as possible. Still, there was nothing in sight.

Bagman’s whistle blew in the distance for the third time. All of the champions were now inside.

Harry kept looking behind him. The old feeling that he was being watched was upon him. The maze was growing darker with every passing minute as the sky overhead deepened to navy. He reached a second fork.

“*Point Me*,” he whispered to his wand, holding it flat in his palm.

The wand spun around once and pointed toward his right, into solid hedge. That way was north, and he knew that he needed to go northwest for the center of the maze. The best he could do was to take the left fork and go right again as soon as possible.

The path ahead was empty too, and when Harry reached a right turn and took it, he again found his way unblocked. Harry didn't know why, but the lack of obstacles was unnerving him. Surely he should have met something by now? It felt as though the maze were luring him into a false sense of security. Then he heard movement right behind him. He held out his wand, ready to attack, but its beam fell only upon Cedric, who had just hurried out of a path on the right-hand side. Cedric looked severely shaken. The sleeve of his robe was smoking.

"Hagrid's Blast-Ended Skrewts!" he hissed. "They're enormous — I only just got away!"

He shook his head and dived out of sight, along another path. Keen to put plenty of distance between himself and the skrewts, Harry hurried off again. Then, as he turned a corner, he saw . . . a dementor gliding toward him. Twelve feet tall, its face hidden by its hood, its rotting, scabbed hands outstretched, it advanced, sensing its way blindly toward him. Harry could hear its rattling breath; he felt clammy coldness stealing over him, but knew what he had to do. . . .

He summoned the happiest thought he could, concentrated with all his might on the thought of getting out of the maze and celebrating with Ron and Hermione, raised his wand, and cried, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

A silver stag erupted from the end of Harry's wand and galloped

toward the dementor, which fell back and tripped over the hem of its robes. . . . Harry had never seen a dementor stumble.

“Hang on!” he shouted, advancing in the wake of his silver Patronus. “You’re a boggart! *Riddikulus!*”

There was a loud crack, and the shape-shifter exploded in a wisp of smoke. The silver stag faded from sight. Harry wished it could have stayed, he could have used some company . . . but he moved on, quickly and quietly as possible, listening hard, his wand held high once more.

Left . . . right . . . left again . . . Twice he found himself facing dead ends. He did the Four-Point Spell again and found that he was going too far east. He turned back, took a right turn, and saw an odd golden mist floating ahead of him.

Harry approached it cautiously, pointing the wand’s beam at it. This looked like some kind of enchantment. He wondered whether he might be able to blast it out of the way.

“*Reducto!*” he said.

The spell shot straight through the mist, leaving it intact. He supposed he should have known better; the Reductor Curse was for solid objects. What would happen if he walked through the mist? Was it worth chancing it, or should he double back?

He was still hesitating when a scream shattered the silence.

“Fleur?” Harry yelled.

There was silence. He stared all around him. What had happened to her? Her scream seemed to have come from somewhere ahead. He took a deep breath and ran through the enchanted mist.

The world turned upside down. Harry was hanging from the

ground, with his hair on end, his glasses dangling off his nose, threatening to fall into the bottomless sky. He clutched them to the end of his nose and hung there, terrified. It felt as though his feet were glued to the grass, which had now become the ceiling. Below him the dark, star-spangled heavens stretched endlessly. He felt as though if he tried to move one of his feet, he would fall away from the earth completely.

Think, he told himself, as all the blood rushed to his head, *think . . .*

But not one of the spells he had practiced had been designed to combat a sudden reversal of ground and sky. Did he dare move his foot? He could hear the blood pounding in his ears. He had two choices — try and move, or send up red sparks, and get rescued and disqualified from the task.

He shut his eyes, so he wouldn't be able to see the view of endless space below him, and pulled his right foot as hard as he could away from the grassy ceiling.

Immediately, the world righted itself. Harry fell forward onto his knees onto the wonderfully solid ground. He felt temporarily limp with shock. He took a deep, steadying breath, then got up again and hurried forward, looking back over his shoulder as he ran away from the golden mist, which twinkled innocently at him in the moonlight.

He paused at a junction of two paths and looked around for some sign of Fleur. He was sure it had been she who had screamed. What had she met? Was she all right? There was no sign of red sparks — did that mean she had got herself out of trouble, or was she in such trouble that she couldn't reach her wand? Harry took the right fork

with a feeling of increasing unease . . . but at the same time, he couldn't help thinking, *One champion down . . .*

The Cup was somewhere close by, and it sounded as though Fleur was no longer in the running. He'd got this far, hadn't he? What if he actually managed to win? Fleetinglly, and for the first time since he'd found himself champion, he saw again that image of himself, raising the Triwizard Cup in front of the rest of the school. . . .

He met nothing for ten minutes, but kept running into dead ends. Twice he took the same wrong turning. Finally, he found a new route and started to jog along it, his wandlight waving, making his shadow flicker and distort on the hedge walls. Then he rounded another corner and found himself facing a Blast-Ended Skrewt.

Cedric was right — it *was* enormous. Ten feet long, it looked more like a giant scorpion than anything. Its long sting was curled over its back. Its thick armor glinted in the light from Harry's wand, which he pointed at it.

"Stupefy!"

The spell hit the skrewt's armor and rebounded; Harry ducked just in time, but could smell burning hair; it had singed the top of his head. The skrewt issued a blast of fire from its end and flew forward toward him.

"Impedimenta!" Harry yelled. The spell hit the skrewt's armor again and ricocheted off; Harry staggered back a few paces and fell over. *"IMPEDIMENTA!"*

The skrewt was inches from him when it froze — he had managed to hit it on its fleshy, shell-less underside. Panting, Harry pushed himself away from it and ran, hard, in the opposite direction — the

Impediment Curse was not permanent; the skrewt would be regaining the use of its legs at any moment.

He took a left path and hit a dead end, a right, and hit another; forcing himself to stop, heart hammering, he performed the Four-Point Spell again, backtracked, and chose a path that would take him northwest.

He had been hurrying along the new path for a few minutes, when he heard something in the path running parallel to his own that made him stop dead.

“What are you doing?” yelled Cedric’s voice. “What the hell d’you think you’re doing?”

And then Harry heard Krum’s voice.

“Crucio!”

The air was suddenly full of Cedric’s yells. Horrified, Harry began sprinting up his path, trying to find a way into Cedric’s. When none appeared, he tried the Reductor Curse again. It wasn’t very effective, but it burned a small hole in the hedge through which Harry forced his leg, kicking at the thick brambles and branches until they broke and made an opening; he struggled through it, tearing his robes, and looking to his right, saw Cedric jerking and twitching on the ground, Krum standing over him.

Harry pulled himself up and pointed his wand at Krum just as Krum looked up. Krum turned and began to run.

“Stupefy!” Harry yelled.

The spell hit Krum in the back; he stopped dead in his tracks, fell forward, and lay motionless, facedown in the grass. Harry dashed over to Cedric, who had stopped twitching and was lying there

panting, his hands over his face.

“Are you all right?” Harry said roughly, grabbing Cedric’s arm.

“Yeah,” panted Cedric. “Yeah . . . I don’t believe it . . . he crept up behind me. . . . I heard him, I turned around, and he had his wand on me. . . .”

Cedric got up. He was still shaking. He and Harry looked down at Krum.

“I can’t believe this . . . I thought he was all right,” Harry said, staring at Krum.

“So did I,” said Cedric.

“Did you hear Fleur scream earlier?” said Harry.

“Yeah,” said Cedric. “You don’t think Krum got her too?”

“I don’t know,” said Harry slowly.

“Should we leave him here?” Cedric muttered.

“No,” said Harry. “I reckon we should send up red sparks. Someone’ll come and collect him . . . otherwise he’ll probably be eaten by a skrewt.”

“He’d deserve it,” Cedric muttered, but all the same, he raised his wand and shot a shower of red sparks into the air, which hovered high above Krum, marking the spot where he lay.

Harry and Cedric stood there in the darkness for a moment, looking around them. Then Cedric said, “Well . . . I s’pose we’d better go on. . . .”

“What?” said Harry. “Oh . . . yeah . . . right . . .”

It was an odd moment. He and Cedric had been briefly united against Krum — now the fact that they were opponents came back to

Harry. The two of them proceeded up the dark path without speaking, then Harry turned left, and Cedric right. Cedric's footsteps soon died away.

Harry moved on, continuing to use the Four-Point Spell, making sure he was moving in the right direction. It was between him and Cedric now. His desire to reach the cup first was now burning stronger than ever, but he could hardly believe what he'd just seen Krum do. The use of an Unforgivable Curse on a fellow human being meant a life term in Azkaban, that was what Moody had told them. Krum surely couldn't have wanted the Triwizard Cup that badly. . . . Harry sped up.

Every so often he hit more dead ends, but the increasing darkness made him feel sure he was getting near the heart of the maze. Then, as he strode down a long, straight path, he saw movement once again, and his beam of wandlight hit an extraordinary creature, one which he had only seen in picture form, in his *Monster Book of Monsters*.

It was a sphinx. It had the body of an over-large lion: great clawed paws and a long yellowish tail ending in a brown tuft. Its head, however, was that of a woman. She turned her long, almond-shaped eyes upon Harry as he approached. He raised his wand, hesitating. She was not crouching as if to spring, but pacing from side to side of the path, blocking his progress. Then she spoke, in a deep, hoarse voice.

"You are very near your goal. The quickest way is past me."

"So . . . so will you move, please?" said Harry, knowing what the answer was going to be.

"No," she said, continuing to pace. "Not unless you can answer my

riddle. Answer on your first guess — I let you pass. Answer wrongly — I attack. Remain silent — I will let you walk away from me unscathed.”

Harry’s stomach slipped several notches. It was Hermione who was good at this sort of thing, not him. He weighed his chances. If the riddle was too hard, he could keep silent, get away from the sphinx unharmed, and try and find an alternative route to the center.

“Okay,” he said. “Can I hear the riddle?”

The sphinx sat down upon her hind legs, in the very middle of the path, and recited:

*“First think of the person who lives in disguise,
Who deals in secrets and tells naught but lies.
Next, tell me what’s always the last thing to mend,
The middle of middle and end of the end?
And finally give me the sound often heard
During the search for a hard-to-find word.
Now string them together, and answer me this,
Which creature would you be unwilling to kiss?”*

Harry gaped at her.

“Could I have it again . . . more slowly?” he asked tentatively.

She blinked at him, smiled, and repeated the poem.

“All the clues add up to a creature I wouldn’t want to kiss?” Harry asked.

She merely smiled her mysterious smile. Harry took that for a “yes.” Harry cast his mind around. There were plenty of animals he

wouldn't want to kiss; his immediate thought was a Blast-Ended Skrewt, but something told him that wasn't the answer. He'd have to try and work out the clues. . . .

"A person in disguise," Harry muttered, staring at her, "who lies . . . er . . . that'd be a — an imposter. No, that's not my guess! A — a spy? I'll come back to that . . . could you give me the next clue again, please?"

She repeated the next lines of the poem.

"The last thing to mend," Harry repeated. "Er . . . no idea . . . 'middle of middle' . . . could I have the last bit again?"

She gave him the last four lines.

"The sound often heard during the search for a hard-to-find word," said Harry. "Er . . . that'd be . . . er . . . hang on — 'er'! Er's a sound!"

The sphinx smiled at him.

"Spy . . . er . . . spy . . . er . . ." said Harry, pacing up and down. "A creature I wouldn't want to kiss . . . *a spider!*"

The sphinx smiled more broadly. She got up, stretched her front legs, and then moved aside for him to pass.

"Thanks!" said Harry, and, amazed at his own brilliance, he dashed forward.

He had to be close now, he had to be. . . . His wand was telling him he was bang on course; as long as he didn't meet anything too horrible, he might have a chance. . . .

Harry broke into a run. He had a choice of paths up ahead. "*Point Me!*" he whispered again to his wand, and it spun around and pointed him to the right-hand one. He dashed up this one and saw light ahead.

The Triwizard Cup was gleaming on a plinth a hundred yards away. Suddenly a dark figure hurtled out onto the path in front of him.

Cedric was going to get there first. Cedric was sprinting as fast as he could toward the cup, and Harry knew he would never catch up, Cedric was much taller, had much longer legs —

Then Harry saw something immense over a hedge to his left, moving quickly along a path that intersected with his own; it was moving so fast Cedric was about to run into it, and Cedric, his eyes on the cup, had not seen it —

“Cedric!” Harry bellowed. “On your left!”

Cedric looked around just in time to hurl himself past the thing and avoid colliding with it, but in his haste, he tripped. Harry saw Cedric’s wand fly out of his hand as a gigantic spider stepped into the path and began to bear down upon Cedric.

“*Stupefy!*” Harry yelled; the spell hit the spider’s gigantic, hairy black body, but for all the good it did, he might as well have thrown a stone at it; the spider jerked, scuttled around, and ran at Harry instead.

“*Stupefy! Impedimenta! Stupefy!*”

But it was no use — the spider was either so large, or so magical, that the spells were doing no more than aggravating it. Harry had one horrifying glimpse of eight shining black eyes and razor-sharp pincers before it was upon him.

He was lifted into the air in its front legs; struggling madly, he tried to kick it; his leg connected with the pincers and next moment he was in excruciating pain. He could hear Cedric yelling “*Stupefy!*” too, but his spell had no more effect than Harry’s — Harry raised his

wand as the spider opened its pincers once more and shouted “*Expelliarmus!*”

It worked — the Disarming Spell made the spider drop him, but that meant that Harry fell twelve feet onto his already injured leg, which crumpled beneath him. Without pausing to think, he aimed high at the spider’s underbelly, as he had done with the skrewt, and shouted “*Stupefy!*” just as Cedric yelled the same thing.

The two spells combined did what one alone had not: The spider keeled over sideways, flattening a nearby hedge, and strewn the path with a tangle of hairy legs.

“Harry!” he heard Cedric shouting. “You all right? Did it fall on you?”

“No,” Harry called back, panting. He looked down at his leg. It was bleeding freely. He could see some sort of thick, gluey secretion from the spider’s pincers on his torn robes. He tried to get up, but his leg was shaking badly and did not want to support his weight. He leaned against the hedge, gasping for breath, and looked around.

Cedric was standing feet from the Triwizard Cup, which was gleaming behind him.

“Take it, then,” Harry panted to Cedric. “Go on, take it. You’re there.”

But Cedric didn’t move. He merely stood there, looking at Harry. Then he turned to stare at the cup. Harry saw the longing expression on his face in its golden light. Cedric looked around at Harry again, who was now holding onto the hedge to support himself. Cedric took a deep breath.

“You take it. You should win. That’s twice you’ve saved my neck

in here.”

“That’s not how it’s supposed to work,” Harry said. He felt angry; his leg was very painful, he was aching all over from trying to throw off the spider, and after all his efforts, Cedric had beaten him to it, just as he’d beaten Harry to ask Cho to the ball. “The one who reaches the cup first gets the points. That’s you. I’m telling you, I’m not going to win any races on this leg.”

Cedric took a few paces nearer to the Stunned spider, away from the cup, shaking his head.

“No,” he said.

“Stop being noble,” said Harry irritably. “Just take it, then we can get out of here.”

Cedric watched Harry steadying himself, holding tight to the hedge.

“You told me about the dragons,” Cedric said. “I would’ve gone down in the first task if you hadn’t told me what was coming.”

“I had help on that too,” Harry snapped, trying to mop up his bloody leg with his robes. “You helped me with the egg — we’re square.”

“I had help on the egg in the first place,” said Cedric.

“We’re still square,” said Harry, testing his leg gingerly; it shook violently as he put weight on it; he had sprained his ankle when the spider had dropped him.

“You should’ve got more points on the second task,” said Cedric mulishly. “You stayed behind to get all the hostages. I should’ve done that.”

“I was the only one who was thick enough to take that song

seriously!” said Harry bitterly. “Just take the cup!”

“No,” said Cedric.

He stepped over the spider’s tangled legs to join Harry, who stared at him. Cedric was serious. He was walking away from the sort of glory Hufflepuff House hadn’t had in centuries.

“Go on,” Cedric said. He looked as though this was costing him every ounce of resolution he had, but his face was set, his arms were folded, he seemed decided.

Harry looked from Cedric to the cup. For one shining moment, he saw himself emerging from the maze, holding it. He saw himself holding the Triwizard Cup aloft, heard the roar of the crowd, saw Cho’s face shining with admiration, more clearly than he had ever seen it before . . . and then the picture faded, and he found himself staring at Cedric’s shadowy, stubborn face.

“Both of us,” Harry said.

“What?”

“We’ll take it at the same time. It’s still a Hogwarts victory. We’ll tie for it.”

Cedric stared at Harry. He unfolded his arms.

“You — you sure?”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Yeah . . . we’ve helped each other out, haven’t we? We both got here. Let’s just take it together.”

For a moment, Cedric looked as though he couldn’t believe his ears; then his face split in a grin.

“You’re on,” he said. “Come here.”

He grabbed Harry’s arm below the shoulder and helped Harry limp toward the plinth where the cup stood. When they had reached

it, they both held a hand out over one of the cup's gleaming handles.

"On three, right?" said Harry. "One — two — three —"

He and Cedric both grasped a handle.

Instantly, Harry felt a jerk somewhere behind his navel. His feet had left the ground. He could not unclench the hand holding the Triwizard Cup; it was pulling him onward in a howl of wind and swirling color, Cedric at his side.

Die Derde Taak

“Dan reken Dompeldorius ook dat Jy-Weet-Wie besig is om sterker te word?” fluister Ron.

Alles wat Harry in die Peinssif gesien het, feitlik alles wat Dompeldorius vir hom vertel en agterna gewys het, deel hy nou met Ron en Hermien – en natuurlik met Sirius, vir wie Harry ’n uil gestuur het die oomblik dat hy Dompeldorius se kantoor verlaat het. Hulle drie sit die aand tot laat in die geselskamer oor alles en praat, tot Harry se kop so draai dat hy later verstaan wat Dompeldorius bedoel met ’n kop wat so vol gedagtes is dat dit ’n verligting is om dit uit te tap.

Ron staar in die geselskamer se vuurherd. Harry verbeel hom dat hy Ron effens sien bewe, hoewel dit ’n warm aand is.

“En hy vertrou vir Snerp?” sê Ron. “Hy vertrou regtig vir Snerp al weet hy dat hy ’n Doodseter was?”

“Ja,” sê Harry.

Hermien het omtrent tien minute laas iets gesê. Sy sit met haar voor-kop op haar hande en staar na haar knieë. Dit lyk vir Harry asof sy ook ’n Peinssif nuttig sal kan gebruik.

“Rika Skinner,” prewel sy uiteindelik.

“Hoekom is jy nou oor haar bekommerd?” vra Ron ongelowig.

“Ek’s nie oor haar bekommerd nie,” sê Hermien vir haar knieë. “Ek het net gedink . . . onthou julle wat sy vir my in die Drie Besemstokke gesê het? ‘Ek weet dinge oor Ludo Bagman wat jou hare sal laat rys?’ Dis wat sy bedoel het, nê? Sy’t verslag gedoen oor sy verhoor, sy weet dat hy vir die Doodseters inligting deurgegee het. En Knipogies ook, onthou . . . ‘Mnr. Bagman is ’n slegte towenaar.’ Mnr. Crouch moet woedend gewees het toe Bagman losgelaat is, hy sou by die huis daaroor gepraat het.”

“Ja, maar Bagman het nie aspris inligting deurgegee nie, het hy?”

Hermien haal haar skouers op.

“En Broddelwerk reken dat *Madame Maxine* vir Crouch aangeval het?” sê Ron toe hy weer na Harry draai.

“Ja,” sê Harry, “maar hy sê net so omdat Crouch naby die Beauxbatons-koets weggeraak het.”

“Ons het nooit aan haar gedink nie, het ons?” sê Ron stadig. “Ek bedoel, sy het beslis reusebloed en sy wil dit nie erken nie –”

“Natuurlik wil sy nie,” sê Hermien skerp. Sy kyk op. “Onthou wat met Hagrid gebeur het toe Rika van sy ma uitgevind het? Kyk vir Broddelwerk, hoe hy gevolgtrekkings oor haar maak net omdat sy ’n halfreus is. Wie het daardie soort vooroordeel nodig? Ek sal waarskynlik ook sê dat ek groot gebou is as ek weet dis wat gaan gebeur indien ek die waarheid sou praat.”

Hermien kyk na haar horlosie.

“Ons het nog niks geoefen nie!” sê sy en sy lyk geskok. “Ons moet die Dwarsboomvloek nog oefen! Ons sal môre regtig daarmee moet begin! Komaan, Harry, jy moet gaan slaap.”

Harry en Ron stap stadig op na hul slaapsaal. Terwyl Harry sy pajamas aantrek, kyk hy na Neville se bed. Getrou aan sy woord aan Dompeldorius het hy niks teenoor Ron en Hermien oor Neville se ouers gerep nie. Toe Harry sy bril afhaal en in die hemelbed klim, probeer hy hom indink hoe dit moet voel om ouers te hê wat nog leef maar jou nie kan herken nie. Hy word dikwels simpatiek behandel deur vreemdelinge omdat hy ’n weeskind is, maar as hy so na Neville se gesnork luister, dink hy dat Neville dit baie meer verdien as hy. Soos hy daar in die donkerte lê, voel Harry ’n opwelling van woede en haat teenoor die mense wat mnr. en mev. Loggerenberg gemartel het . . . hy onthou hoe die skare mnr. Crouch se seun en sy metgeselle uitgejou het toe hulle deur die Dementors by die hof uitgesleep is . . . en hy verstaan hoe hulle moet gevoel het . . . dan onthou hy die melkwyg gesig van die skreeuende seun en besef met ’n skok dat hy ’n jaar later dood is . . .

Dit was Woldemort, dink Harry terwyl hy in die donkerte na die balakyn van sy bed staar, dit kom altyd weer terug na Woldemort . . . dit is hy wat al hierdie gesinne uitmekaar geskeur het, wat al hierdie lewens verwoes het . . .

Ron en Hermien is veronderstel om vir hul eksamens wat op die dag van die derde taak sal klaar maak, te hersien, maar hulle gooi hul volle gewig by Harry se voorbereidings in.

“Moet jou nie daaroor bekommer nie,” sê Hermien kortaf toe Harry hulle daarop wys en sê dat hy nie omgee om ’n bietjie alleen te oefen nie. “Ten minste sal ons volpunte vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste kry, ons sou nooit met al hierdie vloeke in die klas te doen gekry het nie.”

“Goeie opleiding vir wanneer ons almal Aurors is,” sê Ron opgewek terwyl hy die Dwarsboomvloek probeer toepas op ’n perdeby wat die vertrek gonsend binnegekom het, en dit doodstil in die lug laat hang.

Die begin van Junie word die atmosfeer in die kasteel weer eens opgewonde en gespanne. Almal sien uit na die derde taak wat ’n week voor

die einde van die kwartaal sal plaasvind. Harry oefen vloeke in elke beskikbare oomblik van die dag. Oor hierdie taak voel hy baie sekerder van homself as oor enige van die voriges. Moeilik en gevaarlik soos dit ongetwyfeld sal wees, is Moodie tog reg: Harry het reeds voorheen verby monsteragtige dierasies en betowerde hindernisse gekom en hierdie keer is hy vooraf gewaarsku, het hy kans om homself voor te berei op dit wat op hom wag.

Professor McGonagall is moeg daarvan om oral in die skool op hulle af te kom en gee Harry verlof om die leë Transfigurasie-klaskamer tydens middagetes te gebruik. Hy bemeester die Dwarsboomvloek, 'n tower spreuk wat aanvallers se spoed breek en hulle dwarsboom, die Reduseerder, wat hom daartoe in staat stel om soliede voorwerpe uit die pad te blaas, en die Kompastowerspreuk, 'n nuttige vonds van Hermien, wat sy towerstaf noord laat wys en hom in die Doolhof sal help om koers te hou. Hy sukkel egter nog steeds met die Skildtowerspreuk. Dit is veronderstel om 'n tydelike, onsigbare muur om hom te bou wat kleiner vloeke sal afweer; Hermien slaag egter daarin om dit met 'n goedgegemikte Jelliebeenpaljas te verpletter. Harry hink vir ten minste tien minute in die kamer rond voor sy daarin slaag om die teenvloek op te spoor.

"Eintlik vaar jy baie goed," sê Hermien bemoedigend terwyl sy na haar lys kyk en die spreuke wat hulle reeds geleer het, afmerk. "Party van hulle kan dalk handig te pas kom."

"Kom kyk hierna," sê Ron wat voor die venster staan en oor die terrein kyk. "Wat vang Malfoy aan?"

Harry en Hermien staan nader om te kyk. Malfoy, Krabbe en Goliat staan ver onder hulle in die skaduwee van 'n boom. Dit lyk asof Krabbe en Goliat waghout; hulle grynslag albei. Malfoy hou sy hand voor sy mond en is besig om daarin te praat.

"Dit lyk asof hy 'n tweerigtingradio gebruik," sê Harry verbaas.

"Hy kan nie," sê Hermien, "ek het mos vir julle gesê dat daardie soort ding nie by Hogwarts werk nie. Komaan, Harry," voeg sy flink by terwyl sy van die venster af wegdraai en terug na die middel van die vertrek gaan, "kom ons probeer daardie Skildspreuk nog 'n slag."

In hierdie stadium stuur Sirius elke dag 'n uil. Dit lyk asof hy, net soos Hermien, daarop konsentreer om Harry deur die laaste taak te loods voor hulle by enigiets anders betrokke raak. In elke brief herinner hy Harry dat wat ook al buite Hogwarts se mure aan die gang mag wees nie Harry se verantwoordelikheid is nie, en dat hy ook nie by magte is om dit te verander nie.

Indien Woldemort werklik besig is om sterker word (skryf hy), is dit my prioriteit om seker te maak dat jy veilig is. Hy kan dit nie waag om

sy hande op jou te lê terwyl jy onder Dompeldorius se beskerming is nie, maar moet nietemin nie kanse waag nie: konsentreer daarop om veilig deur die doolhof te kom, dan kan ons daarna aan ander sake aandag gee.

Hoe nader die vier-en-twintigste Junie kom, hoe rouer word Harry se senuwees, maar dit is nog nie so erg soos voor die eerste en tweede take nie. Eerstens is hy vol vertroue dat hy hierdie keer alles in sy vermoë gedoen het om hom op die taak voor te berei. Tweedens is dit die laaste taak, en of hy nou goed of sleg vaar, die Toernooi sal verby wees en *dit* sal 'n yslike verligting wees.

Ontbyt op die oggend van die laaste taak is 'n raserige gedoente daar aan die Griffindortafel. Die posuile daag op en bring vir Harry 'n goeie-wense-kaart van Sirius. Dit is net 'n stuk perkament wat dubbeld gevou is en 'n modderige pootmerk voorop het, maar Harry waardeur dit nietemin. 'n Steenuil daag soos gewoonlik op om vir Hermien die oggend se eksemplaar van die *Daaglikse Profeet* te bring. Sy vou die koerant oop, loer na die voorblad en spoeg 'n mond vol pampoensap daaroor uit.

“Wat?” sê Harry en Ron tegelyk terwyl hulle na haar staar.

“Niks,” sê Hermien vinnig en sy probeer om die koerant weg te steek, maar Ron gryp dit by haar.

Hy staar na die hoofopskrif en sê, “Ek glo dit nie. Nie vandag nie. Daardie ou *koei*.”

“Wat?” sê Harry. “Al weer Rika Skinner?”

“Nee,” sê Ron terwyl hy net soos Hermien probeer om die koerant eenkant toe te stoot.

“Dis oor my, nè?” sê Harry.

“Nee,” sê Ron in 'n totaal onoortuigende stem.

Voor Harry egter kan eis om die koerant te sien, skree Draco Malfoy vanaf Slibberin se tafel dwarsoor die Groot Saal.

“Haai, Potter! *Potter!* Hoe voel jou kop? Voel jy oukei? Seker jy gaan nie amok maak nie?”

Malfoy hou ook 'n eksemplaar van die *Daaglikse Profeet* vas. Slibberins reg om die tafel giggel en draai in hul stoele om om Harry se reaksie te sien.

“Laat ek sien,” sê Harry vir Ron. “Gee hier.”

Ron gee die koerant baie traag aan. Harry draai dit om en kyk vas in 'n foto van homself onder 'n banieropskrif:

HARRY POTTER “GEVAARLIK EN VERSTEUR”

Die seun wat vir Hy Wat Nie Genoem Mag Word Nie verslaan het, is onstabiel en moontlik gevaarlik, skryf Rika Skinner, spesiale korre-

spondent. Onrusbarende inligting het onlangs aan die lig gekom oor Harry Potter se vreemde gedrag wat veroorsaak dat sy geskiktheid om aan 'n veeleisende kompetisie soos die Drietowenaarstoernooi deel te neem en selfs die Hogwarts-skool by te woon in twyfel getrek word.

Potter, dit kan die Daaglikse Profeet nou eksklusief onthul, stort gereeld by die skool ineen en kla ook dikwels van pyn in die litteken op sy voorkop ('n nalatenskap van die vloek waarmee Jy-Weet-Wie hom probeer doodmaak het). Verlede Maandag, halfpad deur die Waarsê-klas, het 'n verslaggewer van die Daaglikse Profeet gesien hoe Potter uit die klas storm onder die voorwendsel dat sy litteken te veel pyn om met sy studies te kan voortgaan.

Kundiges aan Sint Mungo se Hospitaal vir Magiese Kwinte en Kwale sê dat dit moontlik is dat Potter se brein permanent deur Woldemort se aanval op hom aangetas is en dat sy aandrang dat die litteken nog pyn, 'n uitdrukking van sy diepgewortelde verwarring kan wees.

"Hy kan selfs maak of dit seer is," sê 'n spesialis, "dit kan 'n pleidooi om aandag wees."

Die Daaglikse Profeet het egter kommerwekkende feite rakende Harry Potter opgediep wat Albus Dompeldorius, skoolhoof van Hogwarts, sorgvuldig van die towenaarspubliek weerhou het.

"Potter kan Parseltong praat," onthul Draco Malfoy, 'n Hogwarts-vierdejaar. "Daar was 'n paar jaar gelede 'n klomp aanvalle op studente en die meeste mense het geglo dat Potter agter alles is na hulle gesien het hoe hy sy humeur tydens 'n tweegeveg verloor en 'n slang op 'n ander seun gesit het. Dit is alles egter toegesmeer. Maar hy's vriende met weerwolwe en reuse ook. Ons dink hy sal enigiets doen vir 'n bietjie mag."

Parseltong, die vermoë om met slange te praat, word lank reeds as 'n Donker Kuns beskou. Die beroemdste Parseltong van ons tyd is inderdaad niemand anders as Jy-Weet-Wie nie. 'n Lid van die Donkermagte-verdedigingsliga wat verkies om nie genoem te word nie, het dit duidelik gestel dat hy enige towenaar wat Parseltong magtig is, beskou as "die moeite werd om te ondersoek. Persoonlik sal ek uiters agterdogtig wees ten opsigte van enige persoon wat met slange kan praat, aangesien slange dikwels in die ergste soort Donker Kunste gebruik word en histories met boosdoeners vereenselwig word." So kom dit ook voor dat "enigene wat die geselskap van wreedaardige kreature soos weerwolwe en reuse opsoek, 'n voorliefde vir geweld het".

Albus Dompeldorius sal beslis moet uitsluitel gee of so 'n seun toegelaat kan word om aan die Drietowenaarstoernooi deel te neem. Daar is diegene wat vrees dat Potter hom tot die Donker Kunste kan wend uit desperaatheid om die Toernooi, waarvan die derde taak vanaand plaasvind, te wen.

“Hou nie meer so baie van my nie, nè?” sê Harry lighartig terwyl hy die koerant opvou.

Aan die oorkant by die Slibberintafel lag Malfoy, Krabbe en Goliath hom uit, tik met hul vingers teen hul koppe en trek groteske, mal gesigte terwyl hulle hul tonge soos slange wikkel.

“Hoe weet sy dat jou litteken tydens Waarsêery seer was?” sê Ron. “Daar’s geen manier hoe sy daar kon gewees het nie, geen manier waarop sy kon hoor –”

“Die venster was oop,” sê Harry. “Ek het dit oopgemaak om lug te kry.”

“Jy was heel bo in die Noordtoring!” sê Hermien. “Jou stem kon nie die hele ent pad tot onder op die terrein gedra het nie!”

“Wel, jy’s die een wat kamma besig is om magiese metodes van meeluistery na te vors,” sê Harry. “Sê jy vir my hoe sy dit gedoen het!”

“Ek probeer!” sê Hermien. “Maar ek . . . ek . . .”

’n Vreemde veraf uitdrukking verskyn skielik op Hermien se gesig. Sy lig haar hand stadig en trek haar vingers deur haar hare.

“Is jy oukei?” vra Ron fronsend vir haar.

“Ja,” sê Hermien uitasem. Sy trek haar vingers opnuut deur haar hare en hou dan haar hand voor haar mond asof sy deur ’n onsigbare tweeringtoringradio praat. Harry en Ron staar na mekaar.

“Ek het ’n idee,” sê Hermien terwyl sy die lug in staar. “Ek dink ek weet . . . want dan sal niemand kan sien nie . . . nie eens Moodie nie . . . en sy sou op die vensterbank kon . . . maar sy’s nie toegelaat . . . sy’s *beslis* nie toegelaat nie . . . ek dink ons het haar! Gee my net twee sekondes in die biblioteek – net om seker te maak!”

Hiermee gryp Hermien haar skoolsak en storm by die Groot Saal uit.

“Hoei!” roep Ron agterna, “ons het Geskiedenis van die Towerkuns-eksamen oor tien minute! Jislai,” sê hy toe hy na Harry terugdraai, “sy moet daardie Skinner-vroumens omtrent haat as sy die kans waag om die begin van ’n eksamen te mis. Wat gaan jy in Binns se klas doen – weer lees?”

Omdat Harry as Drietowenaarskampioen die eksamen kwytsgekeld is, het hy tot dusver elke keer dat daar eksamen geskryf word, agterin die klas gesit om nuwe spreuke vir die derde taak op te soek.

“Seker maar,” sê Harry vir Ron, maar net toe kom professor McGonagall verby die Griffindortafel na hom toe aangestap.

“Potter, die kampioene moet na ontbyt in die kamer net langs die Saal bymekaarkom,” sê sy.

“Maar die taak is eers vanaand!” sê Harry en hy mors per ongeluk roer-eier op sy bors van skrik by die gedagte dat hy die tyd verkeerd kan hê.

“Ek is bewus daarvan, Potter,” sê sy. “Die kampioene se familie is uitgenooi om na die finale taak te kom kyk, sien. Dit is bloot ’n geleentheid vir jou om hulle te groet.”

Terwyl sy wegstap, gaap Harry haar aan.

“Sy verwag darem seker nie dat die Dursleys gaan opdaag nie, hè?” vra hy beteuterd vir Ron.

“Weet nie,” sê Ron. “Harry, ek beter opskud, ek gaan laat wees vir Binns. Sien jou later.”

Harry eet sy ontbyt klaar terwyl die Groot Saal om hom leegloop. Hy sien hoe Fleur Delacour van die Rawekloutafel af opstaan en saam met Cedric na die kamer langsaan stap en ingaan. Harry bly net waar hy is. Hy is regtig nie lus om soontoe te gaan nie. Hy het geen familie nie – ten minste, nie familie wat sal kom kyk hoe hy sy lewe waag nie. Toe hy wel opstaan met die idee om biblioteek toe te gaan en nog hersiening oor vloeke te doen, gaan die kamerdeur oop en Cedric se kop verskyn.

“Harry, komaan, hulle wag vir jou!”

Harry is heeltemal deur die wind toe hy opstaan. Dis tog onmoontlik dat die Dursleys hier is. Hy stap deur die Saal en maak die deur oop na die vertrek.

Cedric en sy ouers staan net binne die deur. Viktor Krum staan in 'n hoek met sy donkerkopma en -pa in vinnige Bulgaars en gesels. Hy het sy pa se haakneus geërf. Aan die ander kant van die vertrek is Fleur besig om met haar ma in Frans te praat. Fleur se sussie, Gabrielle, hou haar ma se hand vas. Sy waai vir Harry, wat terugwaai. Dan sien hy mev. Weasley en Bill wat voor die vuurherd staan en stralend vir hom glimlag.

“Verrassing!” sê mev. Weasley opgewonde toe Harry breed glimlag en na hulle toe stap. “Gedink ons sal na jou kom kyk, Harry!” Sy buk oor en soen hom op die wang.

“Is jy oukei?” vra Bill grinnikend terwyl hy Harry se hand skud. “Charlie wou ook kom, maar hy kon nie verlof kry nie. Hy sê jy was ongelooflik teen daardie Horingstert.”

Fleur Delacour, sien Harry, kyk met groot belangstelling oor haar ma se skouer na Bill. Harry kan sien dat sy geen besware teen lang hare en oorringe met slagtande in het nie.

“Dit is regtig gaaf van julle,” mompel Harry teenoor mev. Weasley. “Ek het vir 'n oomblik gedink – die Dursleys –”

“Hmm,” sê mev. Weasley terwyl sy haar lippe saampers. Sy het haarself nog altyd daarvan weerhou om die Dursleys voor Harry te kritiseer, maar haar oë blits elke keer dat hulle naam genoem word.

“Dis wonderlik om terug hier te wees,” sê Bill terwyl hy in die kamer rondkyk (Violet, die Vet Vrou se vriendin, knipoog vir hom vanuit haar raam). “Het hierdie plek vyf jaar laas gesien. Is daardie prent van die mal ridder nog hier rond? Sir Cadogan?”

“O, ja,” sê Harry wat Sir Cadogan die vorige jaar ontmoet het.

“En die Vet Vrou?” vra Bill.

“Sy was in my tyd al hier,” sê mev. Weasley. “Sy't my een nag toe ek die oggend om vieruur terug slaapsaal toe is behoorlik sleggesê –”

“En wat het Ma teen vieruur in die oggend buite die slaapsaal gemaak?” vra Bill terwyl hy verbaas na mev. Weasley staar.

Mev. Weasley lag skelm en haar oë vonkel.

“Jou pa en ek het vir ’n nagtelike wandeling gegaan,” sê sy. “Hy’s deur Appolylon Pringle gevang – hy was in daardie dae die opsigter – jou pa het nog steeds die merke.”

“Lus om ons op ’n toer te neem, Harry?” sê Bill.

“Ja, oukei,” sê Harry en hulle kies koers na die deur wat na die Groot Saal lei.

Toe hulle verby Amos Diggory stap, kyk hy om. “Daar is jy,” sê hy terwyl hy Harry van kop tot tone bekyk. “Wed jy voel nie heeltemal so vol van jouself noudat Cedric jou met punte ingehaal het nie, hè?”

“Ekskuus?” sê Harry.

“Ignoreer hom,” sê Cedric in ’n gedempte stem vir Harry terwyl hy vir sy pa frons. “Hy’s al kwaad van na Rika Skinner se artikel oor die Drietoewenaarstoernooi – jy weet, die een waarin sy gemaak het asof jy die enigste Hogwartskampioen is.”

“Het ook nie moeite gedoen om dit reg te stel nie, het hy?” sê Amos Diggory hard genoeg sodat Harry kan hoor toe hy saam met mev. Weasley en Bill by die deur wil uitstap. “Maar wat . . . jy sal hom wys, Ced. Het hom al vantevore geklop, onthou?”

“Rika Skinner gaan uit haar pad om onmin te saai, Amos!” sê mev. Weasley vererg. “Ek sou dink dat jy dit weet, siende dat jy vir die Ministerie werk!”

Mnr. Diggory lyk asof hy iets ergerliks gaan sê, maar sy vrou sit haar hand op sy arm en hy haal bloot sy skouers op en draai weg.

Harry het ’n baie genotvolle oggend saam met Bill en mev. Weasley buite op die sonnige terrein waar hy vir hulle die Beauxbatons-koets en die Durmstrang-skip wys. Mev. Weasley is baie geïnteresseerd in die Woelige Wilg wat na haar tyd geplant is en roep allerhande herinnerings op oor die boswagter wat voor Hagrid daar was, ’n man met die naam Org.

“Hoe gaan dit met Percy?” vra Harry toe hulle om die kweekhuise stap.

“Nie goed nie,” sê Bill.

“Hy’s baie ontsteld,” sê mev. Weasley terwyl sy haar stem laat sak en om haar loer. “Die Ministerie wil mnr. Crouch se verdwyning stilhou, maar Percy is ingebring vir ondervraging oor die opdragte wat mnr. Crouch vir hom gestuur het. Dit lyk asof hulle dink dat daar ’n moontlikheid is dat dit nie regtig deur hom geskryf is nie. Percy is onder groot druk. Hulle laat hom nie vanaand namens mnr. Crouch as dié vyfde beoordelaar instaan nie. Cornelius Broddelwerk gaan dit doen.”

Hulle gaan terug kasteel toe vir middagete.

“Ma – Bill!” sê Ron verdwaas toe hy by die Griffindortafel aansluit. “Wat maak julle hier?”

“Kom kyk hoe Harry die laaste taak doen!” sê mev. Weasley vrolik. “Ek moet sê, dit is ’n heerlike verandering om nie te hoef te kook nie. Hoe het dit met die eksamen gegaan?”

“O . . . oukei,” sê Ron. “Kon nie al die gnoomrebelle se name onthou nie, toe’t ek ’n paar opgemaak. Dis alles reg,” sê hy en skep vir homself van die Korniese pastei op, terwyl mev. Weasley streng na hom kyk, “hulle word almal goed soos Bodrod die Bebaarde en Frederik die Vuile genoem, dus was dit nie moeilik nie.”

Fred, George en Ginny kom ook langs hulle sit en Harry geniet dit so dat dit amper voel asof hy terug in die Konynenes is; hy het skoon vergeet om hom oor die aand se taak te bekommer en dit is eers toe Hermien halfpad deur die aandete opdaag dat hy onthou dat sy ’n ingewing oor Rika Skinner gehad het.

“Gaan jy ons vertel –?”

Hermien skud haar kop waarskuwend en loer na mev. Weasley.

“Hallo, Hermien,” sê mev. Weasley baie stywer as gewoonlik.

“Hallo,” sê Hermien en haar glimlag vervaag toe sy die koue uitdrukking op mev. Weasley se gesig sien.

Harry kyk van die een na die ander en dan sê hy, “Mev. Weasley, u glo darem seker nie daardie bog wat Rika Skinner in *Heks en Haard* geskryf het nie? Want Hermien is nie my meisie nie.”

“O!” sê mev. Weasley. “Nee – natuurlik nie!”

Sy is van toe af egter heelwat hartliker teenoor Hermien.

Harry, Bill en mev. Weasley bring die middag met ’n lang wandeling om die kasteel deur en gaan dan terug na die Groot Saal vir die aand se fees. Ludo Bagman en Cornelius Broddelwerk het by die personeeltafel aangesluit. Bagman lyk heeltemal opgetoë, maar Cornelius Broddelwerk, wat langs Madame Maxine sit, lyk streng en sê nie ’n woord nie. Madame Maxine konsentreer op haar bord en dit lyk vir Harry asof haar oë rooi is. Hagrid loer aanhoudend in haar rigting.

Daar is meer gange as gewoonlik, maar Harry, wat nou senuagtig begin voel, eet nie juis veel nie. Toe die betowerde plafon bo hul koppe van blou na ’n dofpers begin vervaag, kom Dompeldorius daar bo by die personeeltafel orent en almal word stil.

“Dames en here, oor vyf minute sal ek julle vra om na die Kwiddiekveld te gaan vir die derde en laaste taak van die Drietowenaarstoernooi. Sal die kampioene asseblief nou mnr. Bagman na die stadion volg?”

Harry staan op. Die Griffindors aan die tafel juig hom toe; die Weasleys en Hermien wens hom sterkte toe en daarna stap hy saam met Cedric, Fleur en Krum by die Groot Saal uit.

“Hoe voel jy, Harry?” vra Bagman toe hulle met die kliptrappe af terrein toe loop. “Vol vertroue?”

“Ek’s oukei,” sê Harry. Dit is soort van waar; hy voel senuagtig, maar

hy sê al die paljasse en towerspreuke wat hy geoefen het oor en oor in sy kop op en die feit dat hy almal kan onthou, laat hom stukke beter voel.

Hulle stap op die Kwiddiekveld wat nou heeltemal onherkenbaar is. 'n Sewe meter hoë heining loop al om die kant. Daar is 'n gaping reg voor hulle, die ingang na die uitgestrekte doolhof. Die gang daaragter lyk donker en grillig.

Vyf minute later begin die stellasies vol word; die lug is gevul met opgewonde stemme en 'n gerammel van voete soos die studente hul plekke inneem. Die lug is nou 'n helder diepblou en die eerste sterre is besig om uit te kom. Hagrid, professor Moodie, professor McGonagall en professor Flickerpitt stap die stadion binne en kom na Bagman en die kampioene. Hulle dra groot, rooi, glimmende sterre op hul hoede, behalwe Hagrid wat syne agterop sy molvelonderbaadjie vasgesteek het.

“Ons gaan die buitekant van die doolhof patroleer,” sê professor McGonagall vir die kampioene. “Indien jy in die moeilikheid beland en gered wil word, moet jy rooi vonke die lug in stuur en dan sal een van ons jou kom haal, verstaan julle?”

Die kampioene knik.

“Weg is julle!” sê Bagman opgeruimd vir die vier patroleerders.

“Sterkte, Harry,” fluister Hagrid toe die vierstuks verskillende rigtings inslaan om hulself om die doolhof te stasioneer. Bagman wys met sy towerstaf na sy keel, prewel “*Sonorus!*” en sy magies versterkte stem weer galm oor die stellasies.

“Dames en here, die derde en finale taak van die Drietowenaarstoernooi is op die punt om te begin! Laat ek jul geheues verfris oor die huidige puntestand! Gelykop in die eerste plek met vyf-en-tagtig punte elk – mnr. Cedric Diggory en mnr. Harry Potter, beide van die Hogwarts-skool!” Die gejuig en applous laat die voëls in die Verbode Woud die donker nag in vlieg. “In die tweede plek, met tagtig punte – mnr. Viktor Krum van die Durmstrang-instituut!” Nog toejuiging. “En in die derde plek – mej. Fleur Delacour van die Beauxbatons-akademie!”

Harry kan net-net vir mev. Weasley, Bill, Ron en Hermien halfpad op met die stellasies uitmaak van waar hulle Fleur beleef toejuig. Hy waai vir hulle en hulle waai stralend terug.

“Dus . . . wag vir die fluitjie, Harry, Cedric!” sê Bagman. “Drie – twee – een –”

Hy blaas kort en hard en Harry en Cedric laat vat na die doolhof.

Die tamaai hoë heinings gooi swart skaduwees oor die pad. Harry weet nie of dit is omdat hulle so hoog en dig is, of omdat hulle betower is nie, maar die geraas van die toeskouers word heeltemal verdoof die oomblik dat hulle die doolhof binnegaan. Dit voel amper vir Harry asof hy weer onder die water is. Hy haal sy towerstaf uit, mompel “*Lumos!*” en hoor hoe Cedric dit ook agter hom doen.

Sowat vyftig tree verder bereik hulle 'n vurk. Hulle kyk na mekaar.

“Sien jou,” sê Harry en hy draai links terwyl Cedric regs draai.

Harry hoor Bagman se fluitjie vir die tweede keer. Krum het die doolhof binnegekom. Harry loop vinniger. Dit lyk asof sy gekose pad heeltemal verlate is. Hy draai regs en gaan haastig voort terwyl hy sy towerstaf hoog bo sy kop hou om so ver moontlik te kan sien. Daar is nog steeds niks in sig nie.

In die verte blaas Bagman se fluitjie vir die derde maal. Nou is al die kampioene binne-in die doolhof.

Harry kyk aanhoudend om. Die ou gevoel dat hy dopgehou word, is weer eens met hom. Met elke minuut wat verbygaan, word die doolhof donkerder soos die lug daar bo tot 'n vlootblou kleur verdiep. Dan bereik hy 'n tweede vurk.

“Wys my,” fluister hy vir sy towerstaf terwyl hy dit plat op sy palm laat lê.

Die towerstaf tol in die rondte en wys regs. Dit is noord en hy weet dat hy noordwes moet gaan om by die doolhof se middelpunt te kom. Al wat hy kan doen, is om links te draai en dan weer so gou moontlik regs.

Die pad voor hom is ook leeg, en toe Harry 'n draai na regs kry en daarlangs gaan, lê die pad weer eens oop voor hom. Harry weet nie hoe-
kom nie, maar die gebrek aan hindernisse ontsenu hom. Teen hierdie tyd moet hy darem al iets teengekom het? Dit is asof die doolhof hom 'n vals gevoel van veiligheid gee. Dan hoor hy 'n beweging agter hom. Hy hou sy towerstaf op, gereed om aan te val, maar die ligstraal val net op Cedric wat uit 'n gang aan sy regterkant aangedraf kom. Cedric lyk besonder bewering. Die mou van sy kleed smeul.

“Hagrid se Spuitstertkrewels!” sis hy. “Hulle is tamaai – ek het net-net weggekom!”

Hy skud sy kop en verdwyn met 'n ander paadjie. Harry is gretig om so ver moontlik van die Krewels af weg te kom en hy draf vinnig verder. Toe gaan hy om 'n hoek en hy sien –

'n Dementor wat na hom sweef. Dit is vier meter lank, sy gesig is bedek deur sy kap, sy verrottende, skubberige hande is uitgestrek voor hom. Soos hy nader kom, voel hy sy pad blindweg na Harry toe. Harry kan sy asem hoor roggel; hy voel hoe die klam koue oor hom spoel, maar hy weet wat hy moet doen . . .

Hy dink aan die gelukkigste gedagte moontlik, konsentreer met mag en mening op hoe hy uit die doolhof gaan kom en saam met Ron en Hermien gaan feesvier. Dan lig hy sy towerstaf en skree, “*Expecto Patronum!*”

'n Silwer takbok bars uit die punt van Harry se towerstaf en galop op die Dementor af wat terugval en oor sy kleed se soom struikel . . . Harry het 'n Dementor nog nooit sien struikel nie.

“Wag ’n bietjie!” skree hy terwyl hy agter sy silwer Patronus aanstorm, “jy’s ’n Boggart! Riddikulus!”

Daar is ’n harde klappgeluid en die vormveranderaar ontplof in ’n warreling van rook. Die silwer takbok vervaag en verdwyn. Harry wens dat dit kon bly, hy sal hou van ’n bietjie geselskap . . . hy stap egter so vin-nig en geluidloos moontlik aan terwyl hy fyn luister, sy towerstaf weer eens hoog in die lug.

Links . . . regs . . . weer links . . . twee keer loop hy homself in ’n dood-loop vas. Weer doen hy die Kompasspreuk en vind dat hy besig is om te ver oos te gaan. Hy draai om, draai dan regs en sien ’n vreemde goue mistigheid wat in die lug voor hom hang.

Harry gaan versigtig nader, die punt van sy towerstaf daarop gerig. Dit lyk soos die een of ander soort towerspel. Hy wonder of hy dit uit die pad sal kan blaas.

“*Reducto!*” sê hy.

Die towerspreuk skiet regdeur die mis wat onaangetas bly. Hy moet seker van beter geweet het; die Reduseertowerspreuk is vir soliede dinge. Wat sal gebeur as hy net eenvoudig deur die mistigheid loop? Is dit dit werd om die kans te waag of moet hy eerder omdraai?

Hy aarsel nog toe ’n kreet deur die stilte weergalm.

“Fleur?” gil Harry.

Dit is doodstil. Hy kyk om hom rond. Wat het met haar gebeur? Dit het geklink asof die kreet van daar voor iewers gekom het. Hy trek sy asem diep in en hardloop deur die betowerde mis.

Die wêreld slaan bollemakiesie. Harry hang van die grond af, sy hare staan penorent, sy bril swaai skeef aan sy neus en dreig om die bodemlose lug in te val. Hy druk dit vas teen sy neus en bly verskrik hang. Dit voel asof sy voete vasgeplak is aan die gras wat nou die plafon geword het. Onder hom strek die donker sterbesaaide hemel eindeloos ver voor hom uit. Dit voel asof hy heeltemal van die aarde af sal val as hy een van sy voete sou probeer beweeg.

Dink, sê hy vir homself terwyl die bloed na sy kop vloei, *dink* . . .

Nie een van die towerspreuke wat hy geoefen het, is egter geskik om ’n skielike ommeswaai van hemel en aarde te bestry nie. Kan hy dit waag om sy voet te beweeg? Hy kan die bloed in sy ore hoor pols. Hy het twee keuses – hy kan probeer beweeg, of hy kan rooi vonke uitstuur, waarmee hy gered maar ook van die taak gediskwalifiseer sal wees.

Hy maak sy oë toe sodat hy nie die eindelose ruimte voor hom kan sien nie en trek dan sy regtervoet so hard as hy kan uit die grasplafon.

Onmiddellik draai die wêreld weer reg. Harry val vooroor op sy knieë op wonderlike vaste aarde. Vir ’n oomblik voel hy lam van skok. Hy trek sy asem kalmerend diep in, staan op en kyk terug oor sy skouer toe hy wegdraf van die goue mis wat heeltemal onskadelik in die maanlig vonkel.

Waar twee paaie kruis, gaan hy staan en kyk om hom rond vir 'n teken van Fleur. Hy is seker dit was sy wat geskreeu het. Wat het sy raakge-loop? Het sy iets oorgekom? Daar is nie 'n teken van rooi vonke nie – beteken dit dat sy veilig is, of is sy so diep in die sop dat sy nie haar towerstaf in die hande kan kry nie? Dis met 'n toenemende gevoel van onrustigheid dat Harry die regterhandse vurk neem . . . terselfdertyd kan hy nie anders as om te dink, *een kampioen is uit die weg geruim* nie.

Die Beker moet iewers in die nabyheid wees en dit klink asof Fleur nie meer deelneem nie. Hy het so ver gekom. Wat as hy dit regkry om te wen? Vir 'n vlietende oomblik en vir die eerste keer sedert hy kampioen geword het, sien hy weer daardie beeld van homself waar hy die Drietownaarsbeker voor die res van die skool in die lug hou . . .

Vir tien minute kom hy niks teen nie, behalwe doodloope. Twee keer neem hy dieselfde verkeerde draai. Uiteindelik vind hy 'n nuwe roete en begin om daarlangs te draf. Die lig van sy towerstaf beweeg heen en weer en laat sy skaduwee teen die heiningmure verwronge flikker. Dan gaan hy om nog 'n draai en bevind homself van aangesig tot aangesig met 'n Spuitstertkrewel.

Cedric was reg – dit is tamaai. Dit is drie meter lank en lyk meer soos 'n reuseskerpioen as enigiets anders. Die lang angel is gekrom oor sy rug. Sy dik pantser glinster in die lig van Harry se towerstaf wat hy daarop gerig hou.

“*Bedwelms!*”

Die towerspreuk tref die Krewel se pantser en bons weg; Harry koes net betyds, maar ruik gebrande hare; dit het die bokant van sy kop geskroei. Die Krewel spuit 'n straal vlamme uit sy punt en skiet nader aan hom.

“*Dwarsboom!*” gil Harry. Weer eens tref die towerspreuk die Krewel se pantser en bons weg; Harry steier 'n paar tree agteruit en slaan neer. “*DWARSBOOM!*”

Die Krewel is feitlik op hom, toe dit eensklaps vries – hy het dit reggekry om dit op sy vlesige, doplose onderkant te tref. Harry stoot homself hygend daarvan weg en hardloop vir al wat hy werd is in die teenoorgestelde rigting – die Dwarsboomspreuk is nie permanent nie, die Krewel kan die gebruik van sy bene enige oomblik terugkry.

Hy kies 'n pad wat links draai, maar dis 'n doodloop, na regs, nog een; hy dwing homself om met 'n kloppende hart tot stilstand te kom, die Kompasspreuk weer te gebruik, om te draai en 'n roete te kies wat hom in 'n noordwestelike rigting sal neem.

Vir 'n hele paar minute draf hy haastig met die nuwe pad langs, tot hy iets in 'n pad parallel met syne hoor hardloop sodat hy in sy spore vassteek.

“Wat doen jy?” gil Cedric. “Wat de hel dink jy doen jy?”

Dan hoor Harry Krum se stem.

“Crucio!”

Die lug is skielik gevul met Cedric se krete. Harry is vervul met afsku toe hy met die paadjie langs hardloop om by Cedric te probeer kom. Toe hy nie ’n deurkomplek kan kry nie, probeer hy die Reduseervloek opnuut. Dit werk nie baie goed nie, maar dit brand tog ’n kleinerige gat in die heining waardeur Harry ’n been kan dwing terwyl hy die dik brame en takke stukkend skop tot daar ’n opening is waardeur hy kan worstel. Sy kleed skeur en toe hy regs kyk, sien hy dat Cedric op die grond lê en ruk en spartel terwyl Krum oor hom staan.

Harry ruk homself reg en rig sy towerstaf op Krum die oomblik dat hy opkyk. Krum draai om en begin hardloop.

“Bedwelm!” skree Harry.

Die spreuk tref Krum in die rug; hy steek in sy spore vas, val vooroor en bly bewegingloos met sy gesig in die gras lê. Harry storm op Cedric af wat nie meer ruk nie, maar nou hygend daar lê met sy hande oor sy gesig.

“Is jy oukei?” vra Harry skor terwyl hy Cedric aan die arm gryp.

“Ja,” hyg Cedric. “Ja . . . ek glo dit nie . . . hy’t my van agter bekruipt . . . ek het hom gehoor en omgedraai en sy towerstaf was op my gerig . . .”

Cedric staan op. Hy bewe nog steeds. Hy en Harry kyk af na Krum.

“Ek kan dit nie glo nie . . . ek dag hy’s oukei,” sê Harry terwyl hy na Krum staar.

“Ek ook,” sê Cedric.

“Het jy vroeër vir Fleur hoor skree?” sê Harry.

“Ja,” sê Cedric. “Dink jy Krum het haar ook gekry?”

“Ek weet nie,” sê Harry stadig.

“Sal ons hom hier los?” mompel Cedric.

“Nee,” sê Harry. “Ek dink ons moet rooi vonke opstuur. Iemand sal hom kom haal . . . netnou vreet ’n Krewel hom op.”

“Sy verdiende loon,” mompel Cedric, maar hy lig sy towerstaf nietermin en stuur ’n fontein rooi vonke die lug in wat bo Krum bly hang en die plek waar hy lê duidelik merk.

Vir ’n paar oomblikke staan Harry en Cedric in die donkerte om hulle en kyk. Dan sê Cedric, “Wel . . . ek veronderstel ons moet seker verder gaan . . .”

“Wat?” sê Harry. “O . . . ja . . . goed . . .”

Dit is ’n ongemaaklike oomblik. Hy en Cedric was vir ’n rukkie teen Krum verenig – nou tref die feit dat hulle teenstanders is hulle opnuut. Hulle stap sonder ’n woord met die donker paadjie langs tot waar Harry links draai en Cedric regs. Cedric se voetstappe sterf gou weg.

Harry stap aan terwyl hy die Kompasspreuk nog steeds gebruik om seker te maak dat hy die regte rigting inslaan. Dit lê nou tussen hom en Cedric. Sy begeerte om eerste by die Beker te kom, is nou sterker as ooit,

maar hy kan nog steeds nie glo wat hy Krum so pas sien doen het nie. Die gebruik van 'n Onvergeeflike Vloek op 'n medemens beteken 'n leeftyd in Azkaban, dit is wat Moodie vir hulle gesê het. Krum wil die Drietowenaarstrofee darem seker nie so graag hê nie . . . Harry stap vinniger.

Elke nou en dan kom hy op nog doodloope af, maar die toenemende donkerte laat hom seker voel dat hy naby die doolhof se middelpunt moet wees. Dan, terwyl hy met 'n lang reguit pad langs stap, sien hy 'n beweging en sy towerstaf se ligstraal val op 'n buitengewone dierasie, een wat hy nog net in prente in sy *Monsterboek van Monsters* gesien het.

Dit is 'n sfinks. Dit het die liggaam van 'n oorgroot leeu, groot pote met kloue en 'n lang gelerige stert met 'n bruin kwas. Die kop is egter dié van 'n vrou. Toe hy nader kom, draai sy haar lang, amandelvormige oë na Harry. Hy lig sy towerstaf aarselend. Sy hurk egter nie soos een wat wil spring nie, maar loop heen en weer oor die pad sodat hy nie verby haar kan kom nie.

Toe praat sy in 'n diep, skor stem. "Jy is baie na aan jou doel. Die kortste roete is verby my."

"Sal . . . sal u dan asseblief padgee?" sê Harry hoewel hy weet wat die antwoord gaan wees.

"Nee," sê sy terwyl sy voortgaan om op en af te loop. "Net indien jy my raaisel kan beantwoord. Antwoord reg – en ek laat jou verbygaan. Antwoord verkeerd – en ek val aan. Bly stil – en ek sal jou ongedeerd van my af laat wegloop."

Harry se moed sak 'n paar kerwe. Dit is Hermien wat goed is met hierdie soort ding, nie hy nie. Hy oorweeg sy kanse. As die raaisel te moeilik is, kan hy altyd stilbly, ongedeerd wegkom en 'n ander roete na die middel probeer soek.

"Oukei," sê hy. "Kan ek die raaisel hoor?"

Die sfinks gaan sit op haar hurke reg in die middel van die pad en resitteer:

*"Dink eers aan iemand wat homself verbloem,
Geheime en leuens is sy enigste roem.
Nog drie, so gekies om saam te val,
In binneste binne en sinne en al.
Die laaste drie is 'n ware toets, van dit
Wat so stewig op jou skouers sit.
Voeg alles nou saam – as jy dit kan doen,
Sal ek weet watter gedierte jy glad nie wil soen."*

Harry gaap haar aan.

"Kan jy dit dalk . . . stadiger sê?" vra hy huiwerig.
Sy knipper haar oë, glimlag en herhaal die gedig.

“Al die leidrade gee my uiteindelik die gedierte wat ek nie wil soen nie?” sê Harry.

Sy glimlag bloot haar geheimsinnige glimlag. Harry aanvaar dat dit “ja” beteken. Hy dink diep. Daar is baie diere wat hy glad nie wil soen nie; sy eerste gedagte is aan ’n Spuitstertkrewel, maar dis asof iets vir hom sê dat dit nie die antwoord is nie. Hy sal moet probeer om die leidrade uit te werk.

“’n Persoon wat homself verbloem,” mompel Harry terwyl hy na haar staar, “wat geheime en leuens . . . h’m . . . dit moet ’n – ’n skelm wees. Nee, dis nie my raaskoot nie! ’n – ’n Spioen? Ek sal later hierna terugkom . . . Kan jy my die tweede leidraad weer gee, asseblief?”

Sy herhaal die volgende twee reëls van die gedig.

“Nog drie, so gekies om saam te val,” herhaal Harry. “H’m . . . het nie ’n idee nie . . . binneste binne . . . kan ek die laaste stukkie gou weer hoor, asseblief?”

Sy sê die laaste vier reëls op.

“Die laaste drie is ’n ware toets, van dit wat so stewig op jou skouers sit,” sê Harry. “H’m . . . dit is . . . h’m . . . wag ’n bietjie . . . dit moet, ja, dit moet ‘kop’ wees! My kop!”

Die sfinks glimlag vir hom.

“Spioen . . . eerste drie letters . . .” sê Harry terwyl hy op en af stap, “binneste binne en sinne, weer drie letters . . . en dan ‘kop’. Dit moet wees . . . h’m . . . wag net . . . spi . . . h’m . . . inne . . .” sê Harry terwyl hy op en neer loop. “’n Gedierte wat ek nie wil soen nie . . . *spinnekop!*”

Nou glimlag die sfinks nog breër. Sy staan op, strek haar voorpote en beweeg dan opsy sodat hy kan verbygaan.

“Dankie!” sê Harry verbaas oor sy briljantheid toe hy verbystorm.

Hy moet nou naby wees, hy moet net . . . sy towerstaf wys hom dat hy presies op koers is; as hy net nie iets aakligs teenkom nie, het hy dalk ’n kans . . .

Voor hom is ’n keuse van paaie. “Wys my!” fluister hy weer vir sy towerstaf en dit spin in die rondte en wys na die regterhandse een. Hy draf gejaag daarlangs en sien ’n lig voor hom.

Die Drietowenaarsbeker staan glinsterend op ’n voetstuk ’n honderd meter verder. Harry het net begin hardloop toe ’n donker figuur in die pad voor hom verskyn.

Cedric gaan eerste daar wees. Cedric nael vir al wat hy werd is na die Beker en Harry weet dat hy hom nooit sal kan inhaal nie, Cedric is baie langer as hy en hy het baie langer bene –

Dan, aan die ander kant van die heining net links van hom, sien Harry iets enorms wat blitsig in die paadjie wat hul pad kruis langs skarrel. Dit beweeg so vinnig dat Cedric daarin gaan vashardloop en Cedric se oë is vasgenael op die Beker, hy het dit nog glad nie gesien nie –

“Cedric!” bulder Harry. “Kyk links!”

Cedric kyk, net betyds om homself verby die ding te slinger en ’n bot-sing te vermy, maar hy struikel in sy haas. Harry sien hoe Cedric se to-werstaf uit sy hand vlieg net toe ’n reusagtige spinnekop by die paadjie indraai en op Cedric afpyl.

“*Bedwelml!*” gil Harry weer; die towerspreuk tref die spinnekop se enorme, harige swart lyf, maar dit help so min dat hy net sowel ’n klip kon gegooi het; die spinnekop ruk, skarrel om en pyl nou op Harry af.

“*Bedwelml! Dwarsboom! Bedwelml!*”

Dit is egter nutteloos – die spinnekop is óf so groot, óf so magies dat die spreuke hom bloot irriteer – vir een angswekkende oomblik sien Har-ry agt glansende swart oë en vlymskerp knypers en toe is dit op hom.

Die voorpote lig hom op; hy worstel so al wat hy kan, skop daarna; sy been tref die knypers en is onmiddellik ondraaglik seer – hy hoor hoe Cedric ook “*Bedwelml!*” skree, maar sy spreuk het nog minder van ’n uit-werking as Harry s’n – Harry lig sy towerstaf en toe die spinnekop sy knypers weer oopmaak, skreeu hy, “*Expelliarmus!*”

Dit werk. Die Ontwapeningspreuk veroorsaak dat die spinnekop hom laat los, maar dit beteken dat Harry vier meter ver op sy reeds beseerde been val wat onder hom invou. Sonder om te aarsel, mik hy hoog na die spinnekop se maag, net soos hy met die Krewel gemaak het en skree, “*Be-dwelml!*” op die oomblik dat Cedric dieselfde ding uitgil.

Die twee towerspreuke in kombinasie doen wat een op sy eie nie kon regkry nie – die spinnekop kantel sywaarts, val ’n nabygeleë heining plat en slaan in ’n bondel harige bene op die pad neer.

“Harry!” hoor hy Cedric roep. “Is jy oukei? Het dit op jou geval?”

“Nee,” roep Harry hygend terug. Hy kyk af na sy been. Dit bloei erg. Hy sien ’n soort dik, gomagtige afskeiding van die spinnekop se knypers op sy geskeurde kleed. Hy probeer opstaan, maar sy been bewoos so erg dat dit nie sy gewig kan dra nie. Hy leun teen die heining terwyl hy na asem snak en staar dan om hom.

Cedric is enkele treë van die Drietowenaarstrofee af wat glimmend agter hom staan.

“Vat dit,” sê Harry hygend vir Cedric. “Toe, vat dit. Jy’s daar.”

Cedric beweeg egter nie. Hy staan bloot na Harry en kyk. Dan draai hy om en staar na die Beker. In die goue lig van die Beker kan Harry die uit-drukking van verlange op sy gesig sien. Cedric kyk weer om na Harry wat nou aan die heining moet klou om nie sy balans te verloor nie.

Cedric trek sy asem diep in. “Neem jy dit. Jy behoort te wen. Jy’t my bas twee keer hier binne gered.”

“Dis nie hoe dit werk nie,” sê Harry. Hy voel sommer kwaad; sy been is verskriklik seer, sy hele liggaam pyn van die gesukkel om die spinne-kop af te skud en ten spyte van al die moeite het Cedric hom nog steeds

uitgestof, net soos hy Harry se hand by Cho in die as geslaan het. “Die een wat eerste by die Beker kom, kry die punte. Dis jy. Ek sê jou ek sal nie ’n resies met hierdie been kan wen nie.”

Cedric gee ’n paar tree nader aan die bedwelmdde spinnekop, weg van die Beker af terwyl hy sy kop skud.

“Nee,” sê hy.

“Hou tog op om so edel te wees,” sê Harry geïrriteerd. “Vat dit net sodat ons hier kan uitkom.”

Cedric kyk hoe Harry homself aan die heining regop hou.

“Jy het my van die drake gesê,” sê Cedric. “Ek sou met die eerste taak al uitgeval het as jy nie vir my gesê het wat op ons wag nie.”

“Ek het ook hulp gehad,” snou Harry hom toe terwyl hy die bloed aan sy been met sy kleed probeer afvee. “Jy’t my met die eier gehelp – ons is kiets.”

“Ek het in die eerste plek hulp met die eier gehad,” sê Cedric.

“Ons is nog steeds kiets,” sê Harry terwyl hy sy been versigtig toets; dit bewe erg toe hy sy gewig daarop sit; hy moet sy enkel verstuit het toe die spinnekop hom laat val het.

“Jy moes meer punte vir die tweede taak gekry het,” sê Cedric koppig. “Jy’t ter wille van die gyselaars agtergebly. Ek moes dit ook gedoen het.”

“Ek was die enigste een wat onnosel genoeg was om daardie lied te glo!” sê Harry bitter. “Vat tog net die Beker!”

“Nee,” sê Cedric.

Hy klim oor die spinnekop se verknoopte bene om by Harry aan te sluit wat na hom staar. Cedric is ernstig. Hy is besig om weg te loop van die soort glorie wat die Hoesenproes-huis nie in eeue gehad het nie.

“Toe nou,” sê Cedric. Dit lyk asof hy elke greintjie vasberadenheid tot sy beskikking moet inspan, maar sy gesig lyk verbete en sy arms is gekruis. Hy het besluit.

Harry kyk van Cedric na die Beker. Vir een skitterende oomblik sien hy homself uit die doolhof kom met die Beker in sy arms. Hy sien hoe hy die Drietowenaarstrofee in die lug hou, hoor hoe die skare brul, sien Cho se gesig, blink van bewondering, helderder as wat hy haar nog ooit tevore gesien het . . . en toe vervaag die prentjie en hy sien Cedric se skaduagtige, vasberade gesig.

“Albei van ons,” sê Harry.

“Wat?”

“Ons vat dit gelyk. Dis nog steeds ’n Hogwarts-oorwinning. Ons deel dit.”

Cedric staar na Harry. Sy arms ontspan. “Jy – jy’s seker?”

“Ja,” sê Harry. “Ja . . . ons het mekaar mos uitgehelp, nê? Ons het saam hier gekom. Nou vat ons dit ook saam.”

Vir 'n oomblik lyk Cedric asof hy sy ore nie kan glo nie; dan breek sy gesig oop in 'n glimlag.

“Oukei,” sê hy. “Kom hierso.”

Hy gryp Harry net onder die skouer aan die arm en help hom om na die voetstuk waarop die Beker staan te hink. Toe hulle daar kom, hou albei 'n hand by een van die Beker se glimmende ore.

“As ek drie sê, oukei?” sê Harry. “Een – twee – drie –”

Hy en Cedric gryp elk 'n oor.

Onmiddellik voel Harry 'n rukbeweging iewers agter sy naeltjie. Sy voete verlaat die grond. Hy kan die hand wat die Drietowenaarstrofee vashou, nie oopmaak nie; dit trek hom en Cedric vorentoe in 'n ruising van wind en warrelende kleure.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



FLESH, BLOOD, AND BONE

Harry felt his feet slam into the ground; his injured leg gave way, and he fell forward; his hand let go of the Triwizard Cup at last. He raised his head.

“Where are we?” he said.

Cedric shook his head. He got up, pulled Harry to his feet, and they looked around.

They had left the Hogwarts grounds completely; they had obviously traveled miles — perhaps hundreds of miles — for even the mountains surrounding the castle were gone. They were standing instead in a dark and overgrown graveyard; the black outline of a small church was visible beyond a large yew tree to their right. A hill rose above them to their left. Harry could just make out the outline of

a fine old house on the hillside.

Cedric looked down at the Triwizard Cup and then up at Harry.

“Did anyone tell *you* the Cup was a Portkey?” he asked.

“Nope,” said Harry. He was looking around the graveyard. It was completely silent and slightly eerie. “Is this supposed to be part of the task?”

“I dunno,” said Cedric. He sounded slightly nervous. “Wands out, d’you reckon?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, glad that Cedric had made the suggestion rather than him.

They pulled out their wands. Harry kept looking around him. He had, yet again, the strange feeling that they were being watched.

“Someone’s coming,” he said suddenly.

Squinting tensely through the darkness, they watched the figure drawing nearer, walking steadily toward them between the graves. Harry couldn’t make out a face, but from the way it was walking and holding its arms, he could tell that it was carrying something. Whoever it was, he was short, and wearing a hooded cloak pulled up over his head to obscure his face. And — several paces nearer, the gap between them closing all the time — Harry saw that the thing in the person’s arms looked like a baby . . . or was it merely a bundle of robes?

Harry lowered his wand slightly and glanced sideways at Cedric. Cedric shot him a quizzical look. They both turned back to watch the approaching figure.

It stopped beside a towering marble headstone, only six feet from them. For a second, Harry and Cedric and the short figure simply

looked at one another.

And then, without warning, Harry's scar exploded with pain. It was agony such as he had never felt in all his life; his wand slipped from his fingers as he put his hands over his face; his knees buckled; he was on the ground and he could see nothing at all; his head was about to split open.

From far away, above his head, he heard a high, cold voice say, "*Kill the spare.*"

A swishing noise and a second voice, which screeched the words to the night: "*Avada Kedavra!*"

A blast of green light blazed through Harry's eyelids, and he heard something heavy fall to the ground beside him; the pain in his scar reached such a pitch that he retched, and then it diminished; terrified of what he was about to see, he opened his stinging eyes.

Cedric was lying spread-eagled on the ground beside him. He was dead.

For a second that contained an eternity, Harry stared into Cedric's face, at his open gray eyes, blank and expressionless as the windows of a deserted house, at his half-open mouth, which looked slightly surprised. And then, before Harry's mind had accepted what he was seeing, before he could feel anything but numb disbelief, he felt himself being pulled to his feet.

The short man in the cloak had put down his bundle, lit his wand, and was dragging Harry toward the marble headstone. Harry saw the name upon it flickering in the wandlight before he was forced around and slammed against it.

TOM RIDDLE

The cloaked man was now conjuring tight cords around Harry, tying him from neck to ankles to the headstone. Harry could hear shallow, fast breathing from the depths of the hood; he struggled, and the man hit him — hit him with a hand that had a finger missing. And Harry realized who was under the hood. It was Wormtail.

“You!” he gasped.

But Wormtail, who had finished conjuring the ropes, did not reply; he was busy checking the tightness of the cords, his fingers trembling uncontrollably, fumbling over the knots. Once sure that Harry was bound so tightly to the headstone that he couldn’t move an inch, Wormtail drew a length of some black material from the inside of his cloak and stuffed it roughly into Harry’s mouth; then, without a word, he turned from Harry and hurried away. Harry couldn’t make a sound, nor could he see where Wormtail had gone; he couldn’t turn his head to see beyond the headstone; he could see only what was right in front of him.

Cedric’s body was lying some twenty feet away. Some way beyond him, glinting in the starlight, lay the Triwizard Cup. Harry’s wand was on the ground at Cedric’s feet. The bundle of robes that Harry had thought was a baby was close by, at the foot of the grave. It seemed to be stirring fretfully. Harry watched it, and his scar seared with pain again . . . and he suddenly knew that he didn’t want to see what was in those robes . . . he didn’t want that bundle opened. . . .

He could hear noises at his feet. He looked down and saw a gigantic snake slithering through the grass, circling the headstone

where he was tied. Wormtail's fast, wheezy breathing was growing louder again. It sounded as though he was forcing something heavy across the ground. Then he came back within Harry's range of vision, and Harry saw him pushing a stone cauldron to the foot of the grave. It was full of what seemed to be water — Harry could hear it slopping around — and it was larger than any cauldron Harry had ever used; a great stone belly large enough for a full-grown man to sit in.

The thing inside the bundle of robes on the ground was stirring more persistently, as though it was trying to free itself. Now Wormtail was busying himself at the bottom of the cauldron with a wand. Suddenly there were crackling flames beneath it. The large snake slithered away into the darkness.

The liquid in the cauldron seemed to heat very fast. The surface began not only to bubble, but to send out fiery sparks, as though it were on fire. Steam was thickening, blurring the outline of Wormtail tending the fire. The movements beneath the robes became more agitated. And Harry heard the high, cold voice again.

"Hurry!"

The whole surface of the water was alight with sparks now. It might have been encrusted with diamonds.

"It is ready, Master."

"Now . . ." said the cold voice.

Wormtail pulled open the robes on the ground, revealing what was inside them, and Harry let out a yell that was strangled in the wad of material blocking his mouth.

It was as though Wormtail had flipped over a stone and revealed

something ugly, slimy, and blind — but worse, a hundred times worse. The thing Wormtail had been carrying had the shape of a crouched human child, except that Harry had never seen anything less like a child. It was hairless and scaly-looking, a dark, raw, reddish black. Its arms and legs were thin and feeble, and its face — no child alive ever had a face like that — flat and snakelike, with gleaming red eyes.

The thing seemed almost helpless; it raised its thin arms, put them around Wormtail's neck, and Wormtail lifted it. As he did so, his hood fell back, and Harry saw the look of revulsion on Wormtail's weak, pale face in the firelight as he carried the creature to the rim of the cauldron. For one moment, Harry saw the evil, flat face illuminated in the sparks dancing on the surface of the potion. And then Wormtail lowered the creature into the cauldron; there was a hiss, and it vanished below the surface; Harry heard its frail body hit the bottom with a soft thud.

Let it drown, Harry thought, his scar burning almost past endurance, *please . . . let it drown. . . .*

Wormtail was speaking. His voice shook; he seemed frightened beyond his wits. He raised his wand, closed his eyes, and spoke to the night.

“Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!”

The surface of the grave at Harry's feet cracked. Horrified, Harry watched as a fine trickle of dust rose into the air at Wormtail's command and fell softly into the cauldron. The diamond surface of the water broke and hissed; it sent sparks in all directions and turned

a vivid, poisonous-looking blue.

And now Wormtail was whimpering. He pulled a long, thin, shining silver dagger from inside his cloak. His voice broke into petrified sobs.

“Flesh — of the servant — w-willingly given — you will — revive — your master.”

He stretched his right hand out in front of him — the hand with the missing finger. He gripped the dagger very tightly in his left hand and swung it upward.

Harry realized what Wormtail was about to do a second before it happened — he closed his eyes as tightly as he could, but he could not block the scream that pierced the night, that went through Harry as though he had been stabbed with the dagger too. He heard something fall to the ground, heard Wormtail’s anguished panting, then a sickening splash, as something was dropped into the cauldron. Harry couldn’t stand to look . . . but the potion had turned a burning red; the light of it shone through Harry’s closed eyelids. . . .

Wormtail was gasping and moaning with agony. Not until Harry felt Wormtail’s anguished breath on his face did he realize that Wormtail was right in front of him.

“B-blood of the enemy . . . forcibly taken . . . you will . . . resurrect your foe.”

Harry could do nothing to prevent it, he was tied too tightly. . . . Squinting down, struggling hopelessly at the ropes binding him, he saw the shining silver dagger shaking in Wormtail’s remaining hand. He felt its point penetrate the crook of his right arm and blood seeping down the sleeve of his torn robes. Wormtail, still panting

with pain, fumbled in his pocket for a glass vial and held it to Harry's cut, so that a dribble of blood fell into it.

He staggered back to the cauldron with Harry's blood. He poured it inside. The liquid within turned, instantly, a blinding white. Wormtail, his job done, dropped to his knees beside the cauldron, then slumped sideways and lay on the ground, cradling the bleeding stump of his arm, gasping and sobbing.

The cauldron was simmering, sending its diamond sparks in all directions, so blindingly bright that it turned all else to velvety blackness. Nothing happened. . . .

Let it have drowned, Harry thought, *let it have gone wrong*. . . .

And then, suddenly, the sparks emanating from the cauldron were extinguished. A surge of white steam billowed thickly from the cauldron instead, obliterating everything in front of Harry, so that he couldn't see Wormtail or Cedric or anything but vapor hanging in the air. . . . *It's gone wrong*, he thought . . . *it's drowned* . . . *please* . . . *please let it be dead*. . . .

But then, through the mist in front of him, he saw, with an icy surge of terror, the dark outline of a man, tall and skeletally thin, rising slowly from inside the cauldron.

"Robe me," said the high, cold voice from behind the steam, and Wormtail, sobbing and moaning, still cradling his mutilated arm, scrambled to pick up the black robes from the ground, got to his feet, reached up, and pulled them one-handed over his master's head.

The thin man stepped out of the cauldron, staring at Harry . . . and Harry stared back into the face that had haunted his nightmares for three years. Whiter than a skull, with wide, livid scarlet eyes and a

nose that was flat as a snake's with slits for nostrils . . .

Lord Voldemort had risen again.

Vlees, Bloed en Gebeentes

Harry voel hoe sy voete die grond tref; sy beseerde been gee pad en hy val vooroor; uiteindelik laat sy hand die Drietowenaarstroeë los en hy kyk op.

“Waar is ons?” sê hy.

Cedric skud sy kop. Hy staan op, trek Harry orent en hulle kyk om hulle rond.

Hulle het die Hogwarts-terrein heeltemal verlaat; dis duidelik dat hulle verskriklik ver gereis het – dalk honderde kilometers – want selfs die berge om die kasteel is weg. Hulle staan in ’n donker en oorgroeide begraafplaas; die swart buitelyne van ’n klein kerkie is sigbaar van agter ’n taksusboom net regs van hulle. Bo hulle, aan hul linkerkant, verrys ’n heuwel. Harry kan die buitelyne van ’n mooi ou huis teen die heuwel net-net uitmaak.

Cedric kyk af na die Drietowenaarstroeë en dan weer op na Harry.

“Het iemand vir jou gesê dat die Beker ’n Poortsleutel is?” vra hy.

“Nee,” sê Harry. Hy kyk om hom in die begraafplaas rond. Dit is doodstil en ietwat grillerig. “Is dit veronderstel om deel van die taak te wees?”

“Ek weet nie,” sê Cedric. Hy klink effens senuagtig. “Towerstawe gereed, of wat dink jy?”

“Jip,” sê Harry, bly dat Cedric die voorstel gemaak het en nie hy nie.

Hulle trek hul towerstawe uit. Harry kyk die hele tyd om hom. Hy het weer eens daardie vreemde gevoel dat hulle dopgehou word.

“Iemand kom hierheen,” sê hy skielik.

Deur vernoude oë staar hulle die duister in en sien hoe ’n figuur koersvas deur die grafte na hulle toe loop. Harry kan nie ’n gesig uitmaak nie, maar aan die manier waarop hy loop en sy arms hou, weet hy dat die figuur iets dra. Wie dit ook al mag wees, is kort en dra ’n mantel met ’n kap wat oor sy kop getrek is om sy gesig weg te steek. En toe – nog ’n paar tree nader terwyl die afstand tussen hulle al kleiner word – sien hy dat die ding in die persoon se arms soos ’n baba lyk . . . of is dit bloot ’n saamgebondelde kleed?

Harry laat sak sy towerstaf effens en loer sydelings na Cedric. Cedric

staar verward na hom. Dan draai hulle albei weer terug om die aankommende figuur dop te hou.

Langs 'n baie hoë marmergrafsteen sowat twee meter van hulle af, gaan hy staan. Vir 'n oomblik kyk Harry, Cedric en die kort figuur bloot na mekaar.

En toe, sonder waarskuwing, ontplof Harry se litteken van die pyn. Dit is 'n pyn soos hy in sy lewe nog nooit ervaar het nie; sy towerstaf glip uit sy vingers toe hy sy hande oor sy gesig slaan; sy knieë swik; hy tref die grond en kan hoegenaamd niks sien nie, sy kop is op die punt om oop te bars.

Van ver af, iewers bo hom, hoor hy 'n hoë, koue stem sê, "*Maak die ekstra een dood.*"

Daar is 'n geruis en dan skree 'n tweede stem die woorde die nag in: "*Avada Kedavra!*"

'n Groen ligstraal skroei deur Harry se ooglede en hy hoor hoe iets swaars die grond langs hom tref; die pyn in sy litteken is nou so erg dat hy daarvan wil opgooi, maar dan neem dit af. Tot die dood toe bang vir wat hy gaan sien, maak hy sy brandende oë oop.

Cedric lê oopgespalk langs hom op die grond. Hy is dood.

Vir 'n oomblik wat soos 'n ewigheid voel, staar Harry na Cedric se gesig, na sy wyd oop grys oë wat so strak en sonder uitdrukking soos die vensters van 'n verlate huis lyk, na sy halfoop mond wat effens verbaas lyk. En toe, voor Harry se brein dit wat hy sien, kan aanvaar, voor hy enigtiets anders as 'n lam ongeloof kan ervaar, voel hy hoe hy orent gepluk word.

Die korterige man in die mantel het sy bondel neergesit, sy towerstaf aangesteek en sleep nou vir Harry na die marmergrafsteen. Harry sien hoe die naam daarop in die lig van die towerstaf flikker, voor hy omgeswaai en daarteen vasgedruk word.

ERIK DHOEWELS

Die man tower nou stywe bande om Harry op en maak hom van sy nek tot sy enkels aan die grafsteen vas. Harry hoor sy asemhaling vlak en vinnig vanuit die dieptes van die kap; hy sit hom teen en die man klap hom – klap hom met 'n hand wat een vinger te min het. Toe besef Harry wie onder die kap is. Dit is Wurmstert.

"Jy!" sê hy en snak na asem.

Wurmstert, wat klaar is met die toue, antwoord nie; hy is besig om te voel of die toue styf genoeg is, sy vingers bewe onbeheerbaar terwyl hy met die knope vroetel. Toe hy seker is dat Harry so styf aan die grafsteen vas is dat hy nie 'n aks kan roer nie, haal Wurmstert 'n stuk swart materiaal uit die binnekant van sy kleed en druk dit ruweg in Harry se mond;

toe, sonder 'n woord, draai hy weg en maak hom uit die voete. Nou kan Harry nie 'n geluid maak nie, hy kan ook nie sien waarheen Wurmstert gegaan het nie; hy kan nie sy kop draai om te sien wat aan die ander kant van die grafsteen gebeur nie; hy kan net reg voor hom kyk.

Cedric se liggaam lê 'n hele ent van hom af. 'n Entjie verder kan Harry die Drietowenaarstrofee in die lig van die sterre sien blink. Harry se towerstaf lê op die grond aan sy voete. Die bondel lappe wat Harry gedink het 'n baba is, lê daar naby aan die voet van die graf. Dit lyk asof dit onrustig roer. Harry hou dit dop en sy litteken begin weer pynlik brand . . . skielik weet hy dat hy nie wil sien wat in daardie kleed toegewikkel is nie . . . hy wil nie hê die bondel moet oopgaan nie . . .

Hy hoor stemme aan sy voete. Hy kyk af en sien 'n reuseslang wat deur die gras seil en om die grafsteen waaraan hy vasgemaak is, sirkel. Wurmstert se vinnige, aamborstige asemteue word weer harder. Dit klink asof hy iets swaars oor die grond sleep. Dan is hy binne Harry se gesigsveld en Harry sien dat hy 'n hekseketel wat van klip gemaak is na die voet van die graf stoot. Dit is vol met iets wat water moet wees – Harry hoor hoe dit rondspoel – en dit is groter as enige hekseketel wat Harry nog ooit gebruik het; 'n yslike pens van klip, groot genoeg dat 'n uitgegroeide man daarin kan sit.

Die ding binne-in die bondel lappe op die grond roer nou met meer dringendheid, asof dit probeer om homself te bevry. Wurmstert vroetel met sy towerstaf by die hekseketel se bodem. Skielik is daar knetterende vlamme onder dit. Die groot slang glip die duisternis in.

Dit klink asof die vloeistof in die hekseketel baie vinnig warm word. Die oppervlak borrel nie net nie, maar stuur ook vurige vonke die lug in, asof dit aan die brand geslaan het. Die stoom word dikker en laat Wurmstert wat die vuur stook se buitelyn vervaag. Die bewegings onder die kleed word onrustiger. Weer hoor Harry die hoë, koue stem.

“Maak gou!”

Nou is die hele oppervlak van die water verlig met vonke wat op die water staan sodat dit lyk asof dit met diamante beslaan is.

“Dit is gereed, meester.”

“Nou . . .” sê die koue stem.

Wurmstert vou die kleed op die grond oop en onthul wat binne-in die bondel lê en Harry uiter 'n gewurgde kreet agter die materiaalprop wat in sy mond gestop is.

Dis asof Wurmstert 'n klip omgedop het en iets wat aaklig, slymerig en blind is, blootgelê het – maar erger, 'n honderd maal erger. Die ding wat Wurmstert gedra het, het die vorm van 'n inmekaar gekrimpte menslike kind, behalwe dat Harry nog nooit iets gesien het wat minder kinderlik is nie. Dit is haarloos en lyk skubberig, 'n donker, rou, rooierige swart. Die arms en bene is maer en uitgeteer en die gesig – geen lewende kind

het nog ooit so 'n gesig gehad nie – is plat en slangagtig met glimmende rooi oë.

Dit lyk asof die ding feitlik hulpeloos is; dit lig sy dun arms en slaan hulle om Wurmstert se nek sodat Wurmstert dit moet optel. Toe hy dit doen, val sy kap terug en in die lig van die vuur sien Harry die uitdrukking van afgryse op Wurmstert se swak en bleek gesig toe hy die gedrog na die kant van die hekseketel dra. Vir 'n oomblik sien Harry hoe die borse, plat gesig verlig word in die vonke wat op die towerdrank se oppervlak dans. Dan laat sak Wurmstert die gedrog tot in die hekseketel; daar is 'n sissgeluid toe dit onder die oppervlak verdwyn; Harry hoor hoe die brose liggaam die bodem met 'n dowwe slag tref.

Laat dit verdrink, dink Harry, wie se litteken nou amper ondraaglik pyn, asseblief . . . laat dit verdrink . . .

Dan praat Wurmstert. Sy stem bewe en dit klink asof hy buite sy sinne beangs is. Hy lig sy towerstaf, maak sy oë toe en praat die nag in. “*Gebeentes van die vader, onwetend gegee, sal die seun hernu!*”

Die oppervlak van die graf aan Harry se voete kraak oop. Vol walging kyk Harry hoe 'n dun straaltjie stof die lug in klim en op Wurmstert se bevel geluidloos in die hekseketel val. Die diamantagtige oppervlak van die water breek sissend oop; dit stuur vonke in alle rigtings en word 'n helder, giftige blou kleur.

Nou kerm Wurmstert jammerlik. Hy haal 'n lang, dun, blink dolk uit sy kleed. Sy stem breek, word benoude snikke. “*Vlees – van die dienskneg – g-gewillig geskenk – sal die meester – lewe gee.*”

Hy steek sy regterhand voor hom uit – die hand met die vermiste vinger. Toe gryp hy die dolk baie stewig in sy linkerhand vas en swaai dit boontoe.

Harry besef 'n oomblik voor dit gebeur wat Wurmstert beplan om te doen – hy maak sy oë so styf moontlik toe, maar hy kan nie die kreet wat deur die nag skeur, uitwis nie. Dit sny deur Harry asof hy ook met 'n dolk gesteek is. Hy hoor hoe iets op die grond val, hoor Wurmstert se gefolterde gehyg en dan 'n walgende plonsgeluid toe die ding in die hekseketel val. Harry kan dit nie verdra om te kyk nie . . . maar die towervloeistof het 'n brandende rooi kleur geword en die gloed skyn deur Harry se geslote ooglede . . .

Wurmstert snak na asem en kerm van die pyn. Dis eers toe Harry Wurmstert se benoude asemteue teen sy gesig voel dat hy besef Wurmstert staan reg voor hom.

“*B-bloed van die vyand . . . met geweld geneem . . . jy sal jou vyand . . . lewe gee.*”

Harry kan niks doen om dit te verhinder nie. Hy is te styf vasgemaak . . . hy kyk skuins af, worstel magteloos teen die toue wat hom vasbind en sien die blink, silwer dolk in Wurmstert se oorblywende hand. Hy

voel hoe die punt sy gebuigde arm deurboor en hoe die bloed oor die mou van sy geskeurde kleed vloei. Wurmstert, wat nog steeds van pyn hyg, vroetel in sy sak op soek na 'n glasflessie wat hy dan teen Harry se sny hou sodat 'n straaltjie bloed daarin loop.

Dan steier hy terug na die hekseketel met Harry se bloed. Hy gooi dit by. Die vloeistof word onmiddellik verblindend wit. Wurmstert, wie se taak nou afgehandel is, val op sy knieë langs die hekseketel neer, sak in-mekaar en rol op die grond terwyl hy die bloeiende stompie van sy arm hygend en snikkend vashou.

Die hekseketel prut en stuur diamantagtige vonke in alle rigtings, so verblindend helder dat alles in die omgewing ferweelagtig swart lyk. Niks gebeur nie . . .

Laat dit verdrink het, dink Harry, laat iets skeef geloop het . . .

En toe, plotseling, word die vonke wat uit die hekseketel spat, geblus. Nou styg 'n kolom dik, wit stoom daaruit op sodat alles voor Harry uit-gewis is, sodat hy nie vir Wurmstert of Cedric of enigiets anders kan sien nie, net die waas wat in die lug hang . . . daar het 'n fout gekom, dink hy . . . dit het verdrink . . . asseblief . . . asseblief, laat dit dood wees . . .

Maar toe, deur die mis voor hom, sien hy met 'n ysingwekkende op-welling van angs die donker buitelyn van 'n man wat lank en skeletagtig maer is en wat stadig uit die hekseketel verrys.

"Klee my," sê die hoë, koue stem van agter die stoom en Wurmstert, wat nog steeds sy verminkte arm in sy hand vashou, skarrel snikkend en kermend nader om die swart kleed van die grond af op te tel. Dan kom hy orent, reik na bo en trek die kleed met een hand oor sy meester se kop.

Die maer man klim uit die hekseketel en staar na Harry . . . en Harry staar terug in die gesig wat hom reeds drie jaar lank nagmerries gee. Witter as 'n skedel, met groot, brandende skarlakenrooi oë, 'n neus so plat soos 'n slang s'n en splete vir neusgate . . .

Die Heer Woldemort het weer verrys.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



THE DEATH EATERS

Voldemort looked away from Harry and began examining his own body. His hands were like large, pale spiders; his long white fingers caressed his own chest, his arms, his face; the red eyes, whose pupils were slits, like a cat's, gleamed still more brightly through the darkness. He held up his hands and flexed the fingers, his expression rapt and exultant. He took not the slightest notice of Wormtail, who lay twitching and bleeding on the ground, nor of the great snake, which had slithered back into sight and was circling Harry again, hissing. Voldemort slipped one of those unnaturally long-fingered hands into a deep pocket and drew out a wand. He caressed it gently too; and then he raised it, and pointed it at Wormtail, who was lifted off the ground and thrown against the

headstone where Harry was tied; he fell to the foot of it and lay there, crumpled up and crying. Voldemort turned his scarlet eyes upon Harry, laughing a high, cold, mirthless laugh.

Wormtail's robes were shining with blood now; he had wrapped the stump of his arm in them.

"My Lord . . ." he choked, "my Lord . . . you promised . . . you did promise . . ."

"Hold out your arm," said Voldemort lazily.

"Oh Master . . . thank you, Master . . ."

He extended the bleeding stump, but Voldemort laughed again.

"The other arm, Wormtail."

"Master, please . . . *please* . . ."

Voldemort bent down and pulled out Wormtail's left arm; he forced the sleeve of Wormtail's robes up past his elbow, and Harry saw something upon the skin there, something like a vivid red tattoo — a skull with a snake protruding from its mouth — the image that had appeared in the sky at the Quidditch World Cup: the Dark Mark. Voldemort examined it carefully, ignoring Wormtail's uncontrollable weeping.

"It is back," he said softly, "they will all have noticed it . . . and now, we shall see . . . now we shall know . . ."

He pressed his long white forefinger to the brand on Wormtail's arm.

The scar on Harry's forehead seared with a sharp pain again, and Wormtail let out a fresh howl; Voldemort removed his fingers from Wormtail's mark, and Harry saw that it had turned jet black.

A look of cruel satisfaction on his face, Voldemort straightened up,

threw back his head, and stared around at the dark graveyard.

“How many will be brave enough to return when they feel it?” he whispered, his gleaming red eyes fixed upon the stars. “And how many will be foolish enough to stay away?”

He began to pace up and down before Harry and Wormtail, eyes sweeping the graveyard all the while. After a minute or so, he looked down at Harry again, a cruel smile twisting his snakelike face.

“You stand, Harry Potter, upon the remains of my late father,” he hissed softly. “A Muggle and a fool . . . very like your dear mother. But they both had their uses, did they not? Your mother died to defend you as a child . . . and I killed my father, and see how useful he has proved himself, in death. . . .”

Voldemort laughed again. Up and down he paced, looking all around him as he walked, and the snake continued to circle in the grass.

“You see that house upon the hillside, Potter? My father lived there. My mother, a witch who lived here in this village, fell in love with him. But he abandoned her when she told him what she was. . . . He didn’t like magic, my father . . .

“He left her and returned to his Muggle parents before I was even born, Potter, and she died giving birth to me, leaving me to be raised in a Muggle orphanage . . . but I vowed to find him . . . I revenged myself upon him, that fool who gave me his name . . . *Tom Riddle*. . . .”

Still he paced, his red eyes darting from grave to grave.

“Listen to me, reliving family history . . .” he said quietly, “why, I am growing quite sentimental. . . . But look, Harry! My *true* family

returns. . . .”

The air was suddenly full of the swishing of cloaks. Between graves, behind the yew tree, in every shadowy space, wizards were Apparating. All of them were hooded and masked. And one by one they moved forward . . . slowly, cautiously, as though they could hardly believe their eyes. Voldemort stood in silence, waiting for them. Then one of the Death Eaters fell to his knees, crawled toward Voldemort, and kissed the hem of his black robes.

“Master . . . Master . . .” he murmured.

The Death Eaters behind him did the same; each of them approaching Voldemort on his knees and kissing his robes, before backing away and standing up, forming a silent circle, which enclosed Tom Riddle’s grave, Harry, Voldemort, and the sobbing and twitching heap that was Wormtail. Yet they left gaps in the circle, as though waiting for more people. Voldemort, however, did not seem to expect more. He looked around at the hooded faces, and though there was no wind, a rustling seemed to run around the circle, as though it had shivered.

“Welcome, Death Eaters,” said Voldemort quietly. “Thirteen years . . . thirteen years since last we met. Yet you answer my call as though it were yesterday. . . . We are still united under the Dark Mark, then! *Or are we?*”

He put back his terrible face and sniffed, his slit-like nostrils widening.

“I smell guilt,” he said. “There is a stench of guilt upon the air.”

A second shiver ran around the circle, as though each member of it longed, but did not dare, to step back from him.

“I see you all, whole and healthy, with your powers intact — such prompt appearances! — and I ask myself . . . why did this band of wizards never come to the aid of their master, to whom they swore eternal loyalty?”

No one spoke. No one moved except Wormtail, who was upon the ground, still sobbing over his bleeding arm.

“And I answer myself,” whispered Voldemort, “they must have believed me broken, they thought I was gone. They slipped back among my enemies, and they pleaded innocence, and ignorance, and bewitchment. . . .

“And then I ask myself, but how could they have believed I would not rise again? They, who knew the steps I took, long ago, to guard myself against mortal death? They, who had seen proofs of the immensity of my power in the times when I was mightier than any wizard living?

“And I answer myself, perhaps they believed a still greater power could exist, one that could vanquish even Lord Voldemort . . . perhaps they now pay allegiance to another . . . perhaps that champion of commoners, of Mudbloods and Muggles, Albus Dumbledore?”

At the mention of Dumbledore’s name, the members of the circle stirred, and some muttered and shook their heads. Voldemort ignored them.

“It is a disappointment to me . . . I confess myself disappointed. . . .”

One of the men suddenly flung himself forward, breaking the circle. Trembling from head to foot, he collapsed at Voldemort’s feet.

“Master!” he shrieked, “Master, forgive me! Forgive us all!”

Voldemort began to laugh. He raised his wand.

“*Crucio!*”

The Death Eater on the ground writhed and shrieked; Harry was sure the sound must carry to the houses around. . . . *Let the police come*, he thought desperately . . . *anyone . . . anything . . .*

Voldemort raised his wand. The tortured Death Eater lay flat upon the ground, gasping.

“Get up, Avery,” said Voldemort softly. “Stand up. You ask for forgiveness? I do not forgive. I do not forget. Thirteen long years . . . I want thirteen years’ repayment before I forgive you. Wormtail here has paid some of his debt already, have you not, Wormtail?”

He looked down at Wormtail, who continued to sob.

“You returned to me, not out of loyalty, but out of fear of your old friends. You deserve this pain, Wormtail. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes, Master,” moaned Wormtail, “please, Master . . . please . . .”

“Yet you helped return me to my body,” said Voldemort coolly, watching Wormtail sob on the ground. “Worthless and traitorous as you are, you helped me . . . and Lord Voldemort rewards his helpers. . . .”

Voldemort raised his wand again and whirled it through the air. A streak of what looked like molten silver hung shining in the wand’s wake. Momentarily shapeless, it writhed and then formed itself into a gleaming replica of a human hand, bright as moonlight, which soared downward and fixed itself upon Wormtail’s bleeding wrist.

Wormtail’s sobbing stopped abruptly. His breathing harsh and ragged, he raised his head and stared in disbelief at the silver hand,

now attached seamlessly to his arm, as though he were wearing a dazzling glove. He flexed the shining fingers, then, trembling, picked up a small twig on the ground and crushed it into powder.

“My Lord,” he whispered. “Master . . . it is beautiful . . . thank you . . . *thank you*. . . .”

He scrambled forward on his knees and kissed the hem of Voldemort’s robes.

“May your loyalty never waver again, Wormtail,” said Voldemort.

“No, my Lord . . . never, my Lord . . .”

Wormtail stood up and took his place in the circle, staring at his powerful new hand, his face still shining with tears. Voldemort now approached the man on Wormtail’s right.

“Lucius, my slippery friend,” he whispered, halting before him. “I am told that you have not renounced the old ways, though to the world you present a respectable face. You are still ready to take the lead in a spot of Muggle-torture, I believe? Yet you never tried to find me, Lucius. . . . Your exploits at the Quidditch World Cup were fun, I daresay . . . but might not your energies have been better directed toward finding and aiding your master?”

“My Lord, I was constantly on the alert,” came Lucius Malfoy’s voice swiftly from beneath the hood. “Had there been any sign from you, any whisper of your whereabouts, I would have been at your side immediately, nothing could have prevented me —”

“And yet you ran from my Mark, when a faithful Death Eater sent it into the sky last summer?” said Voldemort lazily, and Mr. Malfoy stopped talking abruptly. “Yes, I know all about that, Lucius. . . . You have disappointed me. . . . I expect more faithful service in the

future.”

“Of course, my Lord, of course. . . . You are merciful, thank you. . . .”

Voldemort moved on, and stopped, staring at the space — large enough for two people — that separated Malfoy and the next man.

“The Lestranges should stand here,” said Voldemort quietly. “But they are entombed in Azkaban. They were faithful. They went to Azkaban rather than renounce me. . . . When Azkaban is broken open, the Lestranges will be honored beyond their dreams. The dementors will join us . . . they are our natural allies . . . we will recall the banished giants . . . I shall have all my devoted servants returned to me, and an army of creatures whom all fear. . . .”

He walked on. Some of the Death Eaters he passed in silence, but he paused before others and spoke to them.

“Macnair . . . destroying dangerous beasts for the Ministry of Magic now, Wormtail tells me? You shall have better victims than that soon, Macnair. Lord Voldemort will provide. . . .”

“Thank you, Master . . . thank you,” murmured Macnair.

“And here” — Voldemort moved on to the two largest hooded figures — “we have Crabbe . . . you will do better this time, will you not, Crabbe? And you, Goyle?”

They bowed clumsily, muttering dully.

“Yes, Master . . .”

“We will, Master. . . .”

“The same goes for you, Nott,” said Voldemort quietly as he walked past a stooped figure in Mr. Goyle’s shadow.

“My Lord, I prostrate myself before you, I am your most faithful

—”

“That will do,” said Voldemort.

He had reached the largest gap of all, and he stood surveying it with his blank, red eyes, as though he could see people standing there.

“And here we have six missing Death Eaters . . . three dead in my service. One, too cowardly to return . . . he will pay. One, who I believe has left me forever . . . he will be killed, of course . . . and one, who remains my most faithful servant, and who has already reentered my service.”

The Death Eaters stirred, and Harry saw their eyes dart sideways at one another through their masks.

“He is at Hogwarts, that faithful servant, and it was through his efforts that our young friend arrived here tonight. . . .

“Yes,” said Voldemort, a grin curling his lipless mouth as the eyes of the circle flashed in Harry’s direction. “Harry Potter has kindly joined us for my rebirthing party. One might go so far as to call him my guest of honor.”

There was a silence. Then the Death Eater to the right of Wormtail stepped forward, and Lucius Malfoy’s voice spoke from under the mask.

“Master, we crave to know . . . we beg you to tell us . . . how you have achieved this . . . this miracle . . . how you managed to return to us. . . .”

“Ah, what a story it is, Lucius,” said Voldemort. “And it begins — and ends — with my young friend here.”

He walked lazily over to stand next to Harry, so that the eyes of the

whole circle were upon the two of them. The snake continued to circle.

“You know, of course, that they have called this boy my downfall?” Voldemort said softly, his red eyes upon Harry, whose scar began to burn so fiercely that he almost screamed in agony. “You all know that on the night I lost my powers and my body, I tried to kill him. His mother died in the attempt to save him — and unwittingly provided him with a protection I admit I had not foreseen. . . . I could not touch the boy.”

Voldemort raised one of his long white fingers and put it very close to Harry’s cheek.

“His mother left upon him the traces of her sacrifice. . . . This is old magic, I should have remembered it, I was foolish to overlook it . . . but no matter. I can touch him now.”

Harry felt the cold tip of the long white finger touch him, and thought his head would burst with the pain. Voldemort laughed softly in his ear, then took the finger away and continued addressing the Death Eaters.

“I miscalculated, my friends, I admit it. My curse was deflected by the woman’s foolish sacrifice, and it rebounded upon myself. Aaah . . . pain beyond pain, my friends; nothing could have prepared me for it. I was ripped from my body, I was less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost . . . but still, I was alive. What I was, even I do not know . . . I, who have gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality. You know my goal — to conquer death. And now, I was tested, and it appeared that one or more of my experiments had worked . . . for I had not been killed, though the

curse should have done it. Nevertheless, I was as powerless as the weakest creature alive, and without the means to help myself . . . for I had no body, and every spell that might have helped me required the use of a wand. . . .

“I remember only forcing myself, sleeplessly, endlessly, second by second, to exist. . . . I settled in a faraway place, in a forest, and I waited. . . . Surely, one of my faithful Death Eaters would try and find me . . . one of them would come and perform the magic I could not, to restore me to a body . . . but I waited in vain. . . .”

The shiver ran once more around the circle of listening Death Eaters. Voldemort let the silence spiral horribly before continuing.

“Only one power remained to me. I could possess the bodies of others. But I dared not go where other humans were plentiful, for I knew that the Aurors were still abroad and searching for me. I sometimes inhabited animals — snakes, of course, being my preference — but I was little better off inside them than as pure spirit, for their bodies were ill adapted to perform magic . . . and my possession of them shortened their lives; none of them lasted long. . . .

“Then . . . four years ago . . . the means for my return seemed assured. A wizard — young, foolish, and gullible — wandered across my path in the forest I had made my home. Oh, he seemed the very chance I had been dreaming of . . . for he was a teacher at Dumbledore’s school . . . he was easy to bend to my will . . . he brought me back to this country, and after a while, I took possession of his body, to supervise him closely as he carried out my orders. But my plan failed. I did not manage to steal the Sorcerer’s Stone. I was

not to be assured immortal life. I was thwarted . . . thwarted, once again, by Harry Potter. . . .”

Silence once more; nothing was stirring, not even the leaves on the yew tree. The Death Eaters were quite motionless, the glittering eyes in their masks fixed upon Voldemort, and upon Harry.

“The servant died when I left his body, and I was left as weak as ever I had been,” Voldemort continued. “I returned to my hiding place far away, and I will not pretend to you that I didn’t then fear that I might never regain my powers. . . . Yes, that was perhaps my darkest hour . . . I could not hope that I would be sent another wizard to possess . . . and I had given up hope, now, that any of my Death Eaters cared what had become of me. . . .”

One or two of the masked wizards in the circle moved uncomfortably, but Voldemort took no notice.

“And then, not even a year ago, when I had almost abandoned hope, it happened at last . . . a servant returned to me. Wormtail here, who had faked his own death to escape justice, was driven out of hiding by those he had once counted friends, and decided to return to his master. He sought me in the country where it had long been rumored I was hiding . . . helped, of course, by the rats he met along the way. Wormtail has a curious affinity with rats, do you not, Wormtail? His filthy little friends told him there was a place, deep in an Albanian forest, that they avoided, where small animals like themselves had met their deaths by a dark shadow that possessed them . . .

“But his journey back to me was not smooth, was it, Wormtail? For, hungry one night, on the edge of the very forest where he had

hoped to find me, he foolishly stopped at an inn for some food . . . and who should he meet there, but one Bertha Jorkins, a witch from the Ministry of Magic.

“Now see the way that fate favors Lord Voldemort. This might have been the end of Wormtail, and of my last hope for regeneration. But Wormtail — displaying a presence of mind I would never have expected from him — convinced Bertha Jorkins to accompany him on a nighttime stroll. He overpowered her . . . he brought her to me. And Bertha Jorkins, who might have ruined all, proved instead to be a gift beyond my wildest dreams . . . for — with a little persuasion — she became a veritable mine of information.

“She told me that the Triwizard Tournament would be played at Hogwarts this year. She told me that she knew of a faithful Death Eater who would be only too willing to help me, if I could only contact him. She told me many things . . . but the means I used to break the Memory Charm upon her were powerful, and when I had extracted all useful information from her, her mind and body were both damaged beyond repair. She had now served her purpose. I could not possess her. I disposed of her.”

Voldemort smiled his terrible smile, his red eyes blank and pitiless.

“Wormtail’s body, of course, was ill adapted for possession, as all assumed him dead, and would attract far too much attention if noticed. However, he was the able-bodied servant I needed, and, poor wizard though he is, Wormtail was able to follow the instructions I gave him, which would return me to a rudimentary, weak body of my own, a body I would be able to inhabit while

awaiting the essential ingredients for true rebirth . . . a spell or two of my own invention . . . a little help from my dear Nagini,” Voldemort’s red eyes fell upon the continually circling snake, “a potion concocted from unicorn blood, and the snake venom Nagini provided . . . I was soon returned to an almost human form, and strong enough to travel.

“There was no hope of stealing the Sorcerer’s Stone anymore, for I knew that Dumbledore would have seen to it that it was destroyed. But I was willing to embrace mortal life again, before chasing immortality. I set my sights lower . . . I would settle for my old body back again, and my old strength.

“I knew that to achieve this — it is an old piece of Dark Magic, the potion that revived me tonight — I would need three powerful ingredients. Well, one of them was already at hand, was it not, Wormtail? Flesh given by a servant. . . .

“My father’s bone, naturally, meant that we would have to come here, where he was buried. But the blood of a foe . . . Wormtail would have had me use any wizard, would you not, Wormtail? Any wizard who had hated me . . . as so many of them still do. But I knew the one I must use, if I was to rise again, more powerful than I had been when I had fallen. I wanted Harry Potter’s blood. I wanted the blood of the one who had stripped me of power thirteen years ago . . . for the lingering protection his mother once gave him would then reside in my veins too. . . .

“But how to get at Harry Potter? For he has been better protected than I think even he knows, protected in ways devised by Dumbledore long ago, when it fell to him to arrange the boy’s future.

Dumbledore invoked an ancient magic, to ensure the boy's protection as long as he is in his relations' care. Not even I can touch him there. . . . Then, of course, there was the Quidditch World Cup. . . . I thought his protection might be weaker there, away from his relations and Dumbledore, but I was not yet strong enough to attempt kidnap in the midst of a horde of Ministry wizards. And then, the boy would return to Hogwarts, where he is under the crooked nose of that Muggle-loving fool from morning until night. So how could I take him?

“Why . . . by using Bertha Jorkins's information, of course. Use my one faithful Death Eater, stationed at Hogwarts, to ensure that the boy's name was entered into the Goblet of Fire. Use my Death Eater to ensure that the boy won the tournament — that he touched the Triwizard Cup first — the Cup which my Death Eater had turned into a Portkey, which would bring him here, beyond the reach of Dumbledore's help and protection, and into my waiting arms. And here he is . . . the boy you all believed had been my downfall. . . .”

Voldemort moved slowly forward and turned to face Harry. He raised his wand.

“Crucio!”

It was pain beyond anything Harry had ever experienced; his very bones were on fire; his head was surely splitting along his scar; his eyes were rolling madly in his head; he wanted it to end . . . to black out . . . to die . . .

And then it was gone. He was hanging limply in the ropes binding him to the headstone of Voldemort's father, looking up into those bright red eyes through a kind of mist. The night was ringing with the

sound of the Death Eaters' laughter.

“You see, I think, how foolish it was to suppose that this boy could ever have been stronger than me,” said Voldemort. “But I want there to be no mistake in anybody’s mind. Harry Potter escaped me by a lucky chance. And I am now going to prove my power by killing him, here and now, in front of you all, when there is no Dumbledore to help him, and no mother to die for him. I will give him his chance. He will be allowed to fight, and you will be left in no doubt which of us is the stronger. Just a little longer, Nagini,” he whispered, and the snake glided away through the grass to where the Death Eaters stood watching.

“Now untie him, Wormtail, and give him back his wand.”

Die Doodseters

Woldemort draai sy oë van Harry af weg en kyk ondersoekend na sy eie liggaam. Sy hande lyk soos groot, bleek spinnekoppe; sy lang wit vingers betas sy borskas, sy arms, sy gesig; die rooi oë met skrefiespupille soos dié van 'n kat glim nog helderder in die duisternis. Hy hou sy hande omhoog, strek sy vingers en die uitdrukking op sy gesig is een van ekstase. Hy steur hom glad nie aan Wurmstert wat rukkend en bloeiend op die grond lê nie, ook nie aan die groot slang wat nou weer nader geseil het en sissend om Harry sirkel nie. Woldemort steek een van daardie onnatuurlik lang vingers in 'n diep sak en haal 'n towerstaf uit. Hy streel dit ook saggies en toe lig hy dit en rig dit op Wurmstert, wat van die grond af gelig en teen die grafsteen waaraan Harry vasgemaak is geslinger word. Hy stort aan die voet daarvan neer en bly net daar lê, ineengekrimp en snikkend. Woldemort draai sy skarlakenrooi oë na Harry en uiter 'n hoë, koue, vreugdelose lag.

Wurmstert se kleeed blink van die bloed; hy het die stompie van sy arm daarin toegedraai. “My Heer . . .” prewel hy gesmoord, “my Heer . . . u het belowe . . . u het belowe . . .”

“Steek jou arm uit,” sê Woldemort luiweg.

“O, meester . . . dankie, meester . . .”

Hy hou die bloeiende stompie uit, maar Woldemort lag weer. “Die ander arm, Wurmstert.”

“Meester, asseblief . . . asseblief . . .”

Woldemort buk en trek Wurmstert se linkerarm uit; hy dwing die mou van Wurmstert se kleeed na bo, verby sy elmboog en Harry sien iets op die vel, iets wat soos 'n helderrooi tatoeëermerk lyk – 'n kopbeen met 'n slang wat by die mond uitpeul – dieselfde beeld wat tydens die Kwid-diek-Wêreldbeker in die lug verskyn het: die Donker Merk. Woldemort kyk sorgvuldig daarna terwyl hy Wurmstert se onbeheerbare snikke ignoreer.

“Dit is terug,” sê hy sag, “hulle sou dit almal opgelet het . . . en nou sal ons sien . . . nou sal ons weet . . .”

Hy druk sy lang wit vingernael teen die Merk op Wurmstert se arm.

Die litteken op Harry se voorkop brand skielik met 'n skerp skietpyn en Wurmstert uiter opnuut 'n vreeslike kreet: Woldemort haal sy vinger-nael van Wurmstert se Merk af en Harry sien dat dit pikswart geword het.

Met 'n uitdrukking van wrede bevrediging op sy gesig kom Woldemort orent, gooi sy kop terug en kyk in die donker begraafplaas rond.

“Hoeveel sal die moed hê om terug te kom wanneer hulle dit voel?” fluister hy, sy gloeiende rooi oë vasgenaël op die sterre. “En hoeveel sal dwaas genoeg wees om weg te bly?”

Hy begin om op en af voor Harry en Wurmstert te loop terwyl sy oë die hele tyd oor die begraafplaas dwaal. Na 'n rukkie kyk hy af na Harry en 'n wrede glimlaggie vertrek sy slangagtige gesig.

“Jy, Harry Potter, staan op die oorskot van my oorlede vader,” sis hy sag. “'n Moggel en 'n dwaas . . . baie soos jou liewe moeder. Maar hulle was ook van nut, nê? Jou moeder is dood toe sy jou as kind beskerm het . . . en ek het my vader vermoor en kyk net hoe handig kom hy te pas in die dood . . .”

Weer lag Woldemort. Hy loop op en neer terwyl hy oral om hom kyk en die slang die hele tyd in die gras sirkel.

“Sien jy daardie huis op die heuwel, Potter? My vader het daar gewoon. My moeder, 'n heks wat hier in hierdie dorpie gewoon het, het op hom verlief geraak. Hy het haar egter verlaat toe sy vir hom gesê het wat sy is . . . my vader het nie van towerkuns gehou nie . . .

“Hy het haar verlaat en is terug na sy Moggelouers nog voor ek gebore is, Potter, en sy is dood met my geboorte sodat ek in 'n Moggelweeshuis moes grootword . . . Maar ek het gesweer dat ek my op hom sal wreek, daardie ou gek wat sy naam vir my gegee het . . . *Erik Dhoewels* . . .”

Hy stap nog steeds op en neer terwyl sy rooi oë van graf tot graf dartel.

“Luister na my, hoe ek my familiegeskiedenis laat herleef . . .” sê hy gedemp. “Ek raak sowaar sentimenteel . . . maar kyk, Harry! My *ware* familie is besig om terug te keer . . .”

Die lug is skielik gevul met die gesuis van mantels. Tussen die grafte, agter die taksusboom, in elke skaduagtige plek is towenaars besig om te Appareer. Almal dra kappe en maskers. Een vir een kom hulle nader . . . stadig, behoedsaam, asof hulle hul oë kwalik kan glo. Woldemort staan in stilte op hulle en wag. Dan val een van die Doodseters op sy knieë, kruip na Woldemort en soen die soom van sy swart kleed.

“Meester . . . meester . . .” prewel hy.

Die Doodseters agter hom volg sy voorbeeld; elkeen van hulle kom op hul knieë na Woldemort om sy kleed te soen voor hulle teruggaan en opstaan om 'n stil kring te vorm om Erik Dhoewels se graf, Harry, Woldemort en die snikkende en rukkende hopie wat Wurmstert is. Tog los hulle openinge in die kring asof hulle op nog mense wag. Dit lyk egter

nie asof Woldemort nog mense verwag nie. Hy kyk na die gemaskerde gesigte en hoewel daar geen wind waai nie, beweeg 'n ritseling deur die kring asof dit gesidder het.

“Welkom, Doodseters,” sê Woldemort sag. “Dertien jaar . . . dertien jaar sedert ons mekaar laas gesien het. Tog het julle my oproep beantwoord asof dit gister was . . . ons is dus steeds verenig onder die Donker Merk! Nie waar nie?”

Hy gooi sy vreeslike gesig agteroor en snuif, sy spleetagtige neusgate wyd oopgesper.

“Ek ruik skuld,” sê hy. “Die stank van skuld hang in die lug.”

'n Tweede siddering beweeg deur die kring asof elke lid bitter graag, hoewel hulle dit nie durf waag nie, van hom af wil padgee.

“Ek sien julle is almal gesond en in een stuk, met jul magte onverminderd – sulke onmiddellike reaksies! – en ek vra myself . . . hoekom het hierdie groep towenaars nie hul meester aan wie hulle ewige trou gesweer het te hulp gesnel nie?”

Niemand praat nie. Niemand beweeg nie, behalwe Wurmstert wat oor sy bloeiende arm op die grond hurk.

“En ek antwoord myself,” fluister Woldemort, “dat hulle moet geglo het dat ek gebroke is, gedink het dat ek klaar is. Hulle het teruggeglip tussen my vyande en voorgegee dat hulle onskuldig was en onwetend en betower . . .

“En dan vra ek myself, hoe kon hulle glo dat ek nie weer sal verrys nie? Hulle wat weet watter stappe ek lank gelede geneem het om myself teen menslike dood te beskerm? Hulle wat die bewyse van my ontsetten-de krag gesien het in die tye toe ek magtiger as enige lewende toenaar was?

“En ek antwoord myself, dalk het hulle geglo dat 'n groter mag bestaan, een wat selfs die Heer Woldemort kan verslaan . . . dalk het hulle nou trou aan 'n ander gesweer . . . dalk aan daardie kampvegter van gewone mense, Modderbloeders en Moggels, Albus Dompeldorius?”

By die noem van Dompeldorius se naam roer die lede van die kring en 'n paar mompel iets en skud hul koppe.

Woldemort ignoreer hulle. “Dit is vir my 'n teleurstelling . . . ek moet erken dat ek teleurgesteld is . . .”

Een van die mans gooi homself skielik vorentoe en breek die kring. Hy bewe van kop tot tone toe hy voor Woldemort se voete ineens stort.

“Meester!” kreet hy dit uit. “Meester, vergewe my! Vergewe ons almal!”

Woldemort begin lag. Hy lig sy towerstaf. “*Crucio!*”

Die Doodseter op die grond wriemel skreeuend; Harry is seker dat die geluid tot by die huise om hulle moet dra . . . laat die polisie tog kom, dink hy wanhopig . . . enigiemand . . . enigiets . . .

Woldemort lig sy towerstaf. Die gemartelde Doodseter lê plat op die grond en hyg.

“Staan op, Avery,” sê Woldemort sag. “Staan op. Jy vra vergiffenis? Ek vergewe nie. Ek vergeet nie. Dertien lange jare . . . ek wil vergoed wees vir daardie dertien jare voor ek jou vergeef. Wurmstert hier het reeds ’n gedeelte van sy skuld betaal, nè, Wurmstert?”

Hy kyk af na Wurmstert wat nog steeds snik.

“Jy het na my toe teruggekom, nie uit lojaliteit nie, maar uit vrees vir jou gewese vriende. Jy verdien hierdie pyn, Wurmstert. Jy weet dit, nè?”

“Ja, meester,” kerm Wurmstert, “asseblief, meester . . . asseblief . . .”

“Tog het jy my gehelp om na my liggaam terug te keer,” sê Woldemort koud en hy staar na Wurmstert wat op die grond lê en snik. “Nutteloos en verraderlik soos jy is, het jy my gehelp . . . en die Heer Woldemort beloon sy helpers . . .”

Weer lig Woldemort sy towerstaf en warrel dit deur die lug. ’n Streep van wat na gesmelte silwer lyk, lê glinsterend agter die towerstaf. Aanvanklik is dit vormloos en dan neem dit die vorm van ’n glinsterende menslike hand aan, helder soos maanlig. Dit suis af en heg spontaan aan Wurmstert se bloeiende gewrig vas.

Wurmstert se gesnik word eensklaps stil. Sy asem kom skor en roggeleend toe hy sy kop lig en ongelowig na die silwer hand staar wat nou, sonder ’n lasplek, aan sy arm geheg is asof hy ’n glinsterende handskoen dra. Hy strek sy glansende vingers, dan tel hy ’n takkie bewend van die grond af op en verpoeier dit tussen sy vingers.

“My Heer,” fluister hy. “Meester . . . dit is lieflik . . . dankie . . . *dankie* . . .”

Op sy knieë skarrel hy vorentoe om die soom van Woldemort se kleed te soen.

“Mag jou lojaliteit nooit weer wankel nie, Wurmstert,” sê Woldemort.

“Nee, my Heer . . . nooit nie, my Heer . . .”

Wurmstert staan op en neem sy plek in die sirkel in terwyl hy na sy kragtige nuwe hand staar, sy gesig nog steeds blink van die trane. Woldemort stap nou na die man regs van Wurmstert.

“Lucius, my glibberige vriend,” fluister hy toe hy voor hom gaan staan. “Dit is vir my gesê dat jy nie die ou weë afgesweer het nie, hoewel jy ’n respektabele gesig vir die buitewêreld voorhou. Jy is steeds bereid om die voortou te neem wanneer dit by ’n bietjie Moggelmarteling kom, hoor ek? Tog het jy nooit probeer om my te vind nie, Lucius . . . jou petaljes by die Wêreldbeker was pret, ek moet sê . . . maar kon jy jou magte nie beter aangewend het soos om jou meester te soek en hom by te staan nie?”

“My Heer, ek was gedurig op die uitkyk,” kom Lucius Malfoy se stem vinnig van onder die kap. “As daar net ’n teken van u af was, ’n fluiste-

ring oor waar u u bevind het, dan was ek onmiddellik aan u sy, niks sou in my pad kon staan –”

“En tog het jy van my Merk af weggehardloop toe ’n getroue Doodseter dit verlede somer die lug in gestuur het?” sê Woldemort luiweg en Lucius Malfoy hou dadelik op met praat. “Ja, ek weet daarvan, Lucius . . . jy het my teleurgestel . . . in die toekoms verwag ek trouer diens.”

“Natuurlik, my Heer, natuurlik . . . u is genadig, dankie . . .”

Woldemort beweeg verder en gaan staan voor ’n ruimte wat groot genoeg vir twee mense is en wat Malfoy en die volgende persoon van mekaar skei.

“Die Lestranges moes hier gestaan het,” sê Woldemort gedemp. “Hulle word egter in Azkaban gevange gehou. Hulle was getrou. Hulle het verkies om na Azkaban te gaan eerder as om my te verrai . . . sodra Azkaban oopgebreek word, sal die Lestranges bo al hul verwagtings beloon word. Die Dementors sal by ons aansluit . . . hulle is ons natuurlike bondgenote . . . ons sal al die verbanne reuse terugroep . . . ek sal al my dienswillige knegte aan my sy hê en ’n leër van wesens wat by almal vrees inboesem . . .”

Hy stap verder. Verby sommige van die Doodseters stap hy in stilte, voor ander steek hy vas om met hulle te praat.

“Macnair . . . vernietig gevaarlike monsters vir die Ministerie vir Towerkuns, sê Wurmstert vir my? Jy sal spoedig beter slagoffers hê, Macnair. Die Heer Woldemort sal voorsien . . .”

“Dankie, meester . . . dankie,” prewel Macnair.

“En hier,” Woldemort beweeg tot voor die twee grootste figure in kappe, “het ons vir Krabbe . . . hierdie keer sal jy beter vaar, of hoe, Krabbe? En jy, Goliat?”

Hulle buig lompweg en mompel binnensmonds.

“Ja, meester . . .”

“Ons sal, meester . . .”

“Dieselfde geld vir jou, Nott,” sê Woldemort sag toe hy verby ’n geboë figuur wat in Goliat se skaduwee staan, stap.

“My Heer, ek werp myself voor u neer, ek is u mees getroue –”

“Dit is genoeg,” sê Woldemort.

Hy het die grootste gaping van almal bereik en hy staan met sy leweloze rooi oë daarna en kyk asof hy die mense wat daar moet wees voor hom kan sien.

“En hier het ons ses vermiste Doodseters . . . drie is dood in my diens. Een is te lafhartig om terug te keer . . . hy sal betaal. Een, glo ek, het my vir ewig verlaat . . . hy sal natuurlik sterf . . . en een bly my mees getroue dienskneg en het reeds weer in my diens getree.”

Die Doodseters roer; Harry sien hoe hul oë sywaarts van agter hul maskers na mekaar draai.

“Hy is by Hogwarts, daardie troue dienskneg, en dit is aan hom te danke dat ons jong vriendjie vanaand hier is . . .

“Ja,” sê Woldemort en ’n grynslag krul om sy liplose mond toe die kring se oë na Harry flikker. “Harry Potter was so vriendelik om vir my hergeboortepartytjie by ons aan te sluit. ’n Mens kan so ver gaan om hom my eregas te noem.”

Daar is ’n stilte. Toe tree die Doodseter net regs van Wurmstert vorentoe en Lucius Malfoy se stem praat van agter die masker.

“Meester, ons brand om te weet . . . ons versoek u om ons te vertel . . . hoe het u hierdie . . . hierdie wonderwerk . . . hoe het u dit reggekry om na ons toe terug . . .”

“A, wat ’n verhaal is dit nie, Lucius,” sê Woldemort. “En dit begin – en eindig – met my jong vriend hier.”

Hy stap luiweg nader tot langs Harry sodat die oë van die hele kring op die twee van hulle vasgenael is. Die slang gaan voort om om hulle te sirkel.

“Julle weet natuurlik dat hulle hierdie seun my ondergang noem?” sê Woldemort sag, sy rooi oë op Harry, wie se litteken so seer is dat hy amper van pyn skree. “Julle weet almal dat ek op daardie nag toe ek hom probeer doodmaak het my magte en my liggaam verloor het. Sy ma is dood in ’n poging om hom te red – en het onwetend aan hom ’n beskerming gegee wat ek nie voorsien het nie . . . ek kon nie aan die seun raak nie.”

Woldemort lig een van sy lang wit vingers en hou dit baie na aan Harry se wang. “Sy moeder het die spoor van haar opoffering op hom gelaat . . . dit is ou towerkuns, ek moes dit onthou het, dit was dwaas van my om dit oor die hoof te sien . . . dit maak egter nie meer saak nie. Ek kan nou aan hom raak.”

Harry voel hoe die koue punt van die lang wit vinger aan hom raak en dis asof sy kop van pyn gaan bars.

Woldemort lag sag in sy oor, dan neem hy sy vinger weg en gaan voort om met die Doodseters te praat. “Ek het my misreken, my vriende, ek erken dit. As gevolg van die vrou se verspotte opoffering is my vloek teruggekaats en het dit my getref. Aaa . . . pyn der pyne, my vriende; niks kon my daarop voorberei het nie. Ek is uit my liggaam geskeur, ek was minder as ’n gees, minder as die kleinste spook . . . maar, ek het dit oorleef. Wat ek was, weet ek self nie . . . ek wat verder as enigiemand anders gevorder het op die pad na onsterflikheid. Julle ken my doel – om die dood te oorwin. En nou is ek getoets en dit het geblyk dat een of meer van my eksperimente gewerk het . . . want ek is nie dood nie, hoewel die vloek dit moes gedoen het. Desnieteenstaande was ek so magteloos soos die swakste lewende wese en glad nie in staat om myself te help nie . . . Ek het geen liggaam gehad nie en elke towerspreuk wat my sou kon help, benodig die gebruik van ’n towerstaf . . .

“Ek onthou hoe ek myself gedwing het om sonder slaap, eindeloos, sekonde na sekonde, net te bestaan . . . ek het my op ’n afgeleë plek gaan vestig, in ’n woud, en gewag . . . een van my troue Doodseters sal my vir seker kom soek en my vind . . . een van hulle sal kom en die towerkuns wat ek nie kon gebruik nie toepas om my weer ’n liggaam te gee . . . maar ek het tevergeefs gewag . . .”

Weer beweeg ’n siddering deur die kring luisterende Doodseters. Woldemort laat die stilte aaklig uitrek voor hy voortgaan. “Net een mag het vir my behoue gebly. Ek kon die liggame van andere in besit neem. Maar ek kon dit nie waag om te gaan waar daar baie ander mense is nie, want ek het geweet dat die Aurors steeds in die buiteland op soek was na my. Soms het ek in diere gewoon – slange by voorkeur, natuurlik – maar ek was nie juis beter daaraan toe binne-in hulle as toe ek ’n suiwer gees was nie. Hul liggame is nie geskik vir die beoefening van die towerkuns nie . . . ook het my besit van hul liggame hul lewe verkort; geeneen van hulle het lank gehou nie . . .

“Toe . . . vier jaar gelede . . . het dit gelyk asof ek verseker was van ’n manier om terug te kom. ’n Townenaar – jonk, dwaas en liggelowig – het my pad gekruis in die woud waar ek vir my ’n tuiste geskep het. O, dit het na die kans van my drome gelyk . . . hy was ’n onderwyser by Dompeldorius se skool . . . dit was maklik om hom na my wil te buig . . . hy het my na sy land teruggeneem en later het ek besit van sy liggaam oorgeneem om ’n ogie op hom te hou terwyl hy my opdragte uitvoer. My plan het egter misluk. Ek het nie daarin geslaag om die Townenaar se Steen te steel nie. Ek was nie van onsterflikheid verseker nie. Ek was gefnuik . . . gefnuik, weer eens, deur Harry Potter . . .”

Weer stilte; niks roer nie, nie eens die blare aan die taksusboom nie. Die Doodseters is doodstil, die glinsterende oë agter hul maskers is vasgenaël op Woldemort en Harry.

“Die dienskneg is dood toe ek sy liggaam verlaat het en ek was net so swak soos tevore,” gaan Woldemort voort. “Ek het teruggekeer na my wegkruipplek ver daarvandaan en ek sal nie voorgee dat ek nooit vir die herstel van my magte gevrees het nie . . . ja, dit was waarskynlik my donkerste uur . . . ek kon nie hoop dat ek ’n ander townenaar sou vind om oor te neem nie . . . en ek het alle hoop laat vaar dat enige van my Doodseters my wou vind . . .”

Een of twee van die gemaskerde figure in die kring beweeg ongemaklik, maar Woldemort steur hom nie daaraan nie.

“En toe, skaars ’n jaar gelede, toe ek al amper moed opgegee het, gebeur dit . . . ’n dienskneg het na my toe teruggekom. Wurmstert hier, wat sy eie dood geveins het om aan geregtigheid te ontkom, is uit sy skuilplek gedryf deur diegene wat hy vroeër as sy vriende beskou het. Hy het besluit om na sy meester terug te keer. Hy het my kom soek in die

land waar ek volgens gerugte weggekruip het . . . bygestaan, uit die aard van die saak, deur die rotte wat hy langs pad ontmoet het. Wurmstert het 'n eienaardige aanvoeling vir rotte, nè, Wurmstert? Sy smerige vriendjies het vir hom gesê dat daar 'n plek diep in 'n Albaniese woud is wat hulle vermy omdat klein diertjies soos hulle daar hul dood teenkom in die vorm van 'n donker skaduwee wat hulle oorneem . . .

“Sy reis terug na my toe was egter nie maklik nie, was dit, Wurmstert? Een nag, toe hy uit pure honger aan die kant van die einste woud waar hy gehoop het om my te vind soos 'n dwaas by 'n herberg gestop het om iets te ete te kry . . . het hy hom in niemand anders as Bertha Jurgens vasgeloop nie, 'n heks van die Ministerie vir Towerkuns.

“Let op die manier waarop die noodlot die Heer Woldemort begunstig. Dit kon die einde van Wurmstert gewees het en ook van my laaste hoop op herlewing. Maar Wurmstert – met 'n teenwoordigheid van gees wat ek nie van hom verwag het nie – het Bertha Jurgens oorreed om saam met hom vir 'n nagtelike wandeling te gaan. Hy het haar oorrompel . . . en na my gebring. En Bertha Jurgens, wat alles kon geruïneer het, was 'n geskenk wat my wildste drome oortref het . . . want met 'n bietjie oorreding het sy voorwaar 'n goudmyn van inligting geword.

“Sy het my vertel dat die Drietowenaarstoernooi vanjaar by Hogwarts sou plaasvind. Sy het my vertel dat sy van 'n getroue Doodseter weet wat net te gewillig sal wees om my te help as ek hom sou kontak. Sy het baie dinge vir my vertel . . . maar die metodes wat ek gebruik het om die Geheuetowerspreuk op haar te breek, was kragtig en nadat ek alle nuttige inligting uit haar getrek het, was haar liggaam en haar gees onherstelbaar vernietig. Sy het haar doel gedien. Ek kon nie besit van haar neem nie. Ek het van haar ontslae geraak.”

Woldemort glimlag sy verskriklike glimlag, sy rooi oë is leeg en genadeloos.

“Wurmstert se liggaam was natuurlik nie geskik vir besitname nie omdat almal aanvaar het dat hy dood is en hy aandag sou trek as hy iewers gesien word. Hy was egter gesond na liggaam en ek het dit nodig gehad. Hoewel hy 'n treurige towenaar is, was Wurmstert daartoe in staat om die opdragte wat ek hom gegee het uit te voer. Op hierdie manier het ek my eie elementêre swak liggaam bekom, 'n liggaam wat ek sou kon bewoon terwyl ek op die noodsaaklike bestanddele wag vir my ware hergeboorte . . . 'n towerspel of twee wat ek self uitgevind het . . . 'n bietjie hulp van my liewe Nagini,” – Woldemort se rooi oë val op die slang wat nog steeds in sirkels seil – “'n towerdrankie van eenhoringbloed en die slanggif wat Nagini voorsien . . . spoedig het ek 'n amper menslike vorm aangeneem en was ek sterk genoeg om te kan reis.

“Daar was geen hoop meer om die Towenaar se Steen te steel nie, want ek het geweet dat Dompeldorius sou toesien dat dit vernietig word. Ek

was egter bereid om 'n sterflike vorm aan te neem voor ek onsterflikheid weer eens sou najaag. Ek het my mikpunt laer gestel . . . ek sal my ou liggaam terugneem, asook my ou kragte.

“Ek het geweet hoe om dit te doen – dit is 'n ou stukkie Donker Towerkuns, die towerdrankie wat my vannag laat herleef het – ek het drie kragtige bestanddele nodig gehad. Wel, een van hulle was reeds byderhand, nè, Wurmstert? Vlees van 'n troue dienskneg . . .

“My vader se gebeentes het natuurlik beteken dat ons hierheen moes kom, waar hy begrawe is. Maar die bloed van 'n vyand . . . Wurmstert wou hê dat ek enige towenaar moes gebruik, nè, Wurmstert? Enige towenaar wat my haat . . . soos so baie van hulle steeds doen. Maar ek het geweet wie ek moet gebruik as ek wil verrys, magtiger as voor my val. Ek wou Harry Potter se bloed hê. Ek wou die bloed hê van die een wat my dertien jaar gelede van my magte gestroop het, want die talmende beskerming wat sy moeder hom vroeër gegee het, sal dan ook in my are wees . . .

“Maar hoe om vir Harry Potter in die hande te kry? Hy word beter beskerm as wat ek dink selfs hy weet, beskerm op maniere wat Dompeldorius lank gelede bedink het toe dit sy verantwoordelikheid geword het om die seun se toekoms uit te werk. Dompeldorius het ou magie gebruik om seker te maak dat die seun veilig is solank hy in sy familie se sorg is. Nie eens ek kon daar aan hom raak nie . . . toe, natuurlik, was daar die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker . . . ek het gedink dat sy beskerming daar swakker sou wees, ver weg van sy familie en van Dompeldorius, maar ek was nog nie sterk genoeg om die seun te probeer ontvoer te midde van so 'n horde towenaars van die Ministerie nie. En daarna sou die seun terug in Hogwarts wees waar hy dag en nag onder die haakneus van daardie simpele Moggelliefhebber is. Hoe kon ek my hande op hom lê?

“Natuurlik . . . deur Bertha Jurgens se inligting te gebruik. Gebruik my een troue Doodseter, op sy pos by Hogwarts, om te verseker dat die seun se naam in die Beker Vol Vuur beland. Gebruik my Doodseter om seker te maak dat die seun die Toernooi wen – dat hy eerste aan die Drietowenaarsbeker raak – die Beker wat my Doodseter in 'n Poortsleutel verander het en wat hom hierheen sal bring, buite bereik van Dompeldorius se hulp en beskerming en in my wagtende arms. En hier is hy . . . die seun wat julle almal geglo het my ondergang was . . .”

Woldemort beweeg stadig vorentoe en draai dan na Harry. Hy lig sy towerstaf. “*Crucio!*”

Die pyn is erger as wat Harry nog ooit ervaar het; sy beendere is aan die brand; sy kop voel of dit by die litteken kan oopbars; sy oë rol wild in sy kop rond; hy wil hê dat dit moet ophou . . . hy wil flou word . . . doodgaan . . .

Dan is dit oor. Hy hang pap aan die toue wat hom aan Woldemort se

vader se grafsteen vasmaak en kyk, asof deur 'n soort mis, op in daardie helderrooi oë. Die nag weergalm met die geluid van die Doodseters se gelag.

“Julle sien dus hoe dwaas dit was om te dink dat hierdie seun ooit sterker as ek kon wees,” sê Woldemort, “maar ek wil seker wees dat daar geen twyfel in enigiemand se gemoed bestaan nie. Harry Potter het een keer deur 'n geluiskoot ontkom. Ek gaan nou my mag bewys deur hom dood te maak, hier op die daad, voor almal van julle, waar daar geen Dompeldorius is om hom te help nie en geen moeder om vir hom te sterf nie. Ek sal hom 'n billike kans gee. Hy sal toegelaat word om te veg en daar sal geen twyfel in jul gemoedere wees oor wie van ons die sterkste is nie. Wag nog 'n bietjie langer, Nagini,” fluister hy en die slang gly weg in die gras na waar die Doodseters staan en kyk.

“Maak hom los, Wurmstert, en gee sy towerstaf vir hom terug.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



PRIORI INCANTATEM

Wormtail approached Harry, who scrambled to find his feet, to support his own weight before the ropes were untied. Wormtail raised his new silver hand, pulled out the wad of material gagging Harry, and then, with one swipe, cut through the bonds tying Harry to the gravestone.

There was a split second, perhaps, when Harry might have considered running for it, but his injured leg shook under him as he stood on the overgrown grave, as the Death Eaters closed ranks, forming a tighter circle around him and Voldemort, so that the gaps where the missing Death Eaters should have stood were filled. Wormtail walked out of the circle to the place where Cedric's body lay and returned with Harry's wand, which he thrust roughly into Harry's hand without looking at him. Then Wormtail resumed his place in the circle of watching Death Eaters.

"You have been taught how to duel, Harry Potter?" said Voldemort

softly, his red eyes glinting through the darkness.

At these words Harry remembered, as though from a former life, the dueling club at Hogwarts he had attended briefly two years ago. . . . All he had learned there was the Disarming Spell, “*Expelliarmus*” . . . and what use would it be to deprive Voldemort of his wand, even if he could, when he was surrounded by Death Eaters, outnumbered by at least thirty to one? He had never learned anything that could possibly fit him for this. He knew he was facing the thing against which Moody had always warned . . . the unblockable *Avada Kedavra* curse — and Voldemort was right — his mother was not here to die for him this time. . . . He was quite unprotected. . . .

“We bow to each other, Harry,” said Voldemort, bending a little, but keeping his snakelike face upturned to Harry. “Come, the niceties must be observed. . . . Dumbledore would like you to show manners. . . . Bow to death, Harry. . . .”

The Death Eaters were laughing again. Voldemort’s lipless mouth was smiling. Harry did not bow. He was not going to let Voldemort play with him before killing him . . . he was not going to give him that satisfaction. . . .

“I said, *bow*,” Voldemort said, raising his wand — and Harry felt his spine curve as though a huge, invisible hand were bending him ruthlessly forward, and the Death Eaters laughed harder than ever.

“Very good,” said Voldemort softly, and as he raised his wand the pressure bearing down upon Harry lifted too. “And now you face me, like a man . . . straight-backed and proud, the way your father died. . . .

“And now — we duel.”

Voldemort raised his wand, and before Harry could do anything to defend himself, before he could even move, he had been hit again by the Cruciatus Curse. The pain was so intense, so all-consuming, that he no longer knew where he was. . . . White-hot knives were piercing every inch of his skin, his head was surely going to burst with pain, he was screaming more loudly than he'd ever screamed in his life —

And then it stopped. Harry rolled over and scrambled to his feet; he was shaking as uncontrollably as Wormtail had done when his hand had been cut off; he staggered sideways into the wall of watching Death Eaters, and they pushed him away, back toward Voldemort.

“A little break,” said Voldemort, the slit-like nostrils dilating with excitement, “a little pause . . . That hurt, didn't it, Harry? You don't want me to do that again, do you?”

Harry didn't answer. He was going to die like Cedric, those pitiless red eyes were telling him so . . . he was going to die, and there was nothing he could do about it . . . but he wasn't going to play along. He wasn't going to obey Voldemort . . . he wasn't going to beg. . . .

“I asked you whether you want me to do that again,” said Voldemort softly. “Answer me! *Imperio!*”

And Harry felt, for the third time in his life, the sensation that his mind had been wiped of all thought. . . . Ah, it was bliss, not to think, it was as though he were floating, dreaming . . . *just answer no . . . say no . . . just answer no. . . .*

I will not, said a stronger voice, in the back of his head, I won't

answer. . . .

Just answer no. . . .

I won't do it, I won't say it. . . .

Just answer no. . . .

"I WON'T!"

And these words burst from Harry's mouth; they echoed through the graveyard, and the dream state was lifted as suddenly as though cold water had been thrown over him — back rushed the aches that the Cruciatus Curse had left all over his body — back rushed the realization of where he was, and what he was facing. . . .

"You won't?" said Voldemort quietly, and the Death Eaters were not laughing now. "You won't say no? Harry, obedience is a virtue I need to teach you before you die. . . . Perhaps another little dose of pain?"

Voldemort raised his wand, but this time Harry was ready; with the reflexes born of his Quidditch training, he flung himself sideways onto the ground; he rolled behind the marble headstone of Voldemort's father, and he heard it crack as the curse missed him.

"We are not playing hide-and-seek, Harry," said Voldemort's soft, cold voice, drawing nearer, as the Death Eaters laughed. "You cannot hide from me. Does this mean you are tired of our duel? Does this mean that you would prefer me to finish it now, Harry? Come out, Harry . . . come out and play, then . . . it will be quick . . . it might even be painless . . . I would not know . . . I have never died. . . ."

Harry crouched behind the headstone and knew the end had come. There was no hope . . . no help to be had. And as he heard Voldemort draw nearer still, he knew one thing only, and it was beyond fear or

reason: He was not going to die crouching here like a child playing hide-and-seek; he was not going to die kneeling at Voldemort's feet . . . he was going to die upright like his father, and he was going to die trying to defend himself, even if no defense was possible. . . .

Before Voldemort could stick his snakelike face around the headstone, Harry stood up . . . he gripped his wand tightly in his hand, thrust it out in front of him, and threw himself around the headstone, facing Voldemort.

Voldemort was ready. As Harry shouted, "*Expelliarmus!*" Voldemort cried, "*Avada Kedavra!*"

A jet of green light issued from Voldemort's wand just as a jet of red light blasted from Harry's — they met in midair — and suddenly Harry's wand was vibrating as though an electric charge were surging through it; his hand seized up around it; he couldn't have released it if he'd wanted to — and a narrow beam of light connected the two wands, neither red nor green, but bright, deep gold. Harry, following the beam with his astonished gaze, saw that Voldemort's long white fingers too were gripping a wand that was shaking and vibrating.

And then — nothing could have prepared Harry for this — he felt his feet lift from the ground. He and Voldemort were both being raised into the air, their wands still connected by that thread of shimmering golden light. They glided away from the tombstone of Voldemort's father and then came to rest on a patch of ground that was clear and free of graves. . . . The Death Eaters were shouting; they were asking Voldemort for instructions; they were closing in, reforming the circle around Harry and Voldemort, the snake slithering

at their heels, some of them drawing their wands —

The golden thread connecting Harry and Voldemort splintered; though the wands remained connected, a thousand more beams arced high over Harry and Voldemort, crisscrossing all around them, until they were enclosed in a golden, dome-shaped web, a cage of light, beyond which the Death Eaters circled like jackals, their cries strangely muffled now. . . .

“Do nothing!” Voldemort shrieked to the Death Eaters, and Harry saw his red eyes wide with astonishment at what was happening, saw him fighting to break the thread of light still connecting his wand with Harry’s; Harry held onto his wand more tightly, with both hands, and the golden thread remained unbroken. “Do nothing unless I command you!” Voldemort shouted to the Death Eaters.

And then an unearthly and beautiful sound filled the air. . . . It was coming from every thread of the light-spun web vibrating around Harry and Voldemort. It was a sound Harry recognized, though he had heard it only once before in his life: phoenix song.

It was the sound of hope to Harry . . . the most beautiful and welcome thing he had ever heard in his life. . . . He felt as though the song were inside him instead of just around him. . . . It was the sound he connected with Dumbledore, and it was almost as though a friend were speaking in his ear. . . .

Don’t break the connection.

I know, Harry told the music, I know I mustn’t . . . but no sooner had he thought it, than the thing became much harder to do. His wand began to vibrate more powerfully than ever . . . and now the beam between him and Voldemort changed too . . . it was as though large

beads of light were sliding up and down the thread connecting the wands — Harry felt his wand give a shudder under his hand as the light beads began to slide slowly and steadily his way. . . . The direction of the beam's movement was now toward him, from Voldemort, and he felt his wand shudder angrily. . . .

As the closest bead of light moved nearer to Harry's wand-tip, the wood beneath his fingers grew so hot he feared it would burst into flame. The closer that bead moved, the harder Harry's wand vibrated; he was sure his wand would not survive contact with it; it felt as though it was about to shatter under his fingers —

He concentrated every last particle of his mind upon forcing the bead back toward Voldemort, his ears full of phoenix song, his eyes furious, fixed . . . and slowly, very slowly, the beads quivered to a halt, and then, just as slowly, they began to move the other way . . . and it was Voldemort's wand that was vibrating extra-hard now . . . Voldemort who looked astonished, and almost fearful. . . .

One of the beads of light was quivering, inches from the tip of Voldemort's wand. Harry didn't understand why he was doing it, didn't know what it might achieve . . . but he now concentrated as he had never done in his life on forcing that bead of light right back into Voldemort's wand . . . and slowly . . . very slowly . . . it moved along the golden thread . . . it trembled for a moment . . . and then it connected. . . .

At once, Voldemort's wand began to emit echoing screams of pain . . . then — Voldemort's red eyes widened with shock — a dense, smoky hand flew out of the tip of it and vanished . . . the ghost of the hand he had made Wormtail . . . more shouts of pain . . . and

then something much larger began to blossom from Voldemort's wand-tip, a great, grayish something, that looked as though it were made of the solidest, densest smoke. . . . It was a head . . . now a chest and arms . . . the torso of Cedric Diggory.

If ever Harry might have released his wand from shock, it would have been then, but instinct kept him clutching his wand tightly, so that the thread of golden light remained unbroken, even though the thick gray ghost of Cedric Diggory (*was* it a ghost? it looked so solid) emerged in its entirety from the end of Voldemort's wand, as though it were squeezing itself out of a very narrow tunnel . . . and this shade of Cedric stood up, and looked up and down the golden thread of light, and spoke.

"Hold on, Harry," it said.

Its voice was distant and echoing. Harry looked at Voldemort . . . his wide red eyes were still shocked . . . he had no more expected this than Harry had . . . and, very dimly, Harry heard the frightened yells of the Death Eaters, prowling around the edges of the golden dome. . . .

More screams of pain from the wand . . . and then something else emerged from its tip . . . the dense shadow of a second head, quickly followed by arms and torso . . . an old man Harry had seen only in a dream was now pushing himself out of the end of the wand just as Cedric had done . . . and his ghost, or his shadow, or whatever it was, fell next to Cedric's, and surveyed Harry and Voldemort, and the golden web, and the connected wands, with mild surprise, leaning on his walking stick. . . .

"He was a real wizard, then?" the old man said, his eyes on

Voldemort. “Killed me, that one did. . . . You fight him, boy. . . .”

But already, yet another head was emerging . . . and this head, gray as a smoky statue, was a woman’s. . . . Harry, both arms shaking now as he fought to keep his wand still, saw her drop to the ground and straighten up like the others, staring. . . .

The shadow of Bertha Jorkins surveyed the battle before her with wide eyes.

“Don’t let go, now!” she cried, and her voice echoed like Cedric’s as though from very far away. “Don’t let him get you, Harry — don’t let go!”

She and the other two shadowy figures began to pace around the inner walls of the golden web, while the Death Eaters flitted around the outside of it . . . and Voldemort’s dead victims whispered as they circled the duelers, whispered words of encouragement to Harry, and hissed words Harry couldn’t hear to Voldemort.

And now another head was emerging from the tip of Voldemort’s wand . . . and Harry knew when he saw it who it would be . . . he knew, as though he had expected it from the moment when Cedric had appeared from the wand . . . knew, because the woman appearing was the one he’d thought of more than any other tonight. . . .

The smoky shadow of a young woman with long hair fell to the ground as Bertha had done, straightened up, and looked at him . . . and Harry, his arms shaking madly now, looked back into the ghostly face of his mother.

“Your father’s coming. . . .” she said quietly. “Hold on for your father. . . . It will be all right. . . . Hold on. . . .”

And he came . . . first his head, then his body . . . tall and untidy-

haired like Harry, the smoky, shadowy form of James Potter blossomed from the end of Voldemort's wand, fell to the ground, and straightened like his wife. He walked close to Harry, looking down at him, and he spoke in the same distant, echoing voice as the others, but quietly, so that Voldemort, his face now livid with fear as his victims prowled around him, could not hear. . . .

"When the connection is broken, we will linger for only moments . . . but we will give you time . . . you must get to the Portkey, it will return you to Hogwarts . . . do you understand, Harry?"

"Yes," Harry gasped, fighting now to keep a hold on his wand, which was slipping and sliding beneath his fingers.

"Harry . . ." whispered the figure of Cedric, "take my body back, will you? Take my body back to my parents. . . ."

"I will," said Harry, his face screwed up with the effort of holding the wand.

"Do it now," whispered his father's voice, "be ready to run . . . do it now. . . ."

"NOW!" Harry yelled; he didn't think he could have held on for another moment anyway — he pulled his wand upward with an almighty wrench, and the golden thread broke; the cage of light vanished, the phoenix song died — but the shadowy figures of Voldemort's victims did not disappear — they were closing in upon Voldemort, shielding Harry from his gaze —

And Harry ran as he had never run in his life, knocking two stunned Death Eaters aside as he passed; he zigzagged behind headstones, feeling their curses following him, hearing them hit the

headstones — he was dodging curses and graves, pelting toward Cedric's body, no longer aware of the pain in his leg, his whole being concentrated on what he had to do —

"Stun him!" he heard Voldemort scream.

Ten feet from Cedric, Harry dived behind a marble angel to avoid the jets of red light and saw the tip of its wing shatter as the spells hit it. Gripping his wand more tightly, he dashed out from behind the angel —

"Impedimenta!" he bellowed, pointing his wand wildly over his shoulder at the Death Eaters running at him.

From a muffled yell, he thought he had stopped at least one of them, but there was no time to stop and look; he jumped over the Cup and dived as he heard more wand blasts behind him; more jets of light flew over his head as he fell, stretching out his hand to grab Cedric's arm —

"Stand aside! I will kill him! He is mine!" shrieked Voldemort.

Harry's hand had closed on Cedric's wrist; one tombstone stood between him and Voldemort, but Cedric was too heavy to carry, and the Cup was out of reach —

Voldemort's red eyes flamed in the darkness. Harry saw his mouth curl into a smile, saw him raise his wand.

"Accio!" Harry yelled, pointing his wand at the Triwizard Cup.

It flew into the air and soared toward him. Harry caught it by the handle —

He heard Voldemort's scream of fury at the same moment that he felt the jerk behind his navel that meant the Portkey had worked — it was speeding him away in a whirl of wind and color, and Cedric

along with him. . . . They were going back.

Priori Incantatem

Wurmstert stap na Harry wat sukkel om sy voete te vind sodat hy sy gewig op hulle kan sit voor die toue losgemaak word. Wurmstert lig sy nuwe silwer hand, pluk die materiaalprop uit Harry se mond en toe, met een haal, sny hy deur die toue wat Harry aan die grafsteen vasgebind hou.

Daar was dalk 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde waarin Harry dit oorweeg het om die rieme neer te lê, maar sy beseerde been skud onder hom daar waar hy op die oorgroeide graf staan. Die Doodseters kom nader, sluit hul geledere en vorm 'n digte kring om hom en Woldemort sodat die openinge waar die vermiste Doodseters moet wees, verdwyn het. Wurmstert loop uit die kring na die plek waar Cedric se liggaam lê, en keer terug met Harry se towerstaf, wat hy hardhandig in Harry se hand druk sonder om na hom te kyk. Dan gaan hy terug na die kring van Doodseters.

“Jy het geleer hoe om te duelleer, nè, Harry Potter?” sê Woldemort sag en sy rooi oë glinster in die donkerte.

Toe hy hierdie woorde hoor, onthou Harry asof uit 'n vorige lewe die Tweegevegklub by Hogwarts wat hy twee jaar gelede vir 'n kort tydjie bygewoon het . . . Al wat hy daar geleer het, was die Ontwapeningspreuk, “*Expelliarmus*” . . . en wat sal dit tog help, selfs al kry hy dit ook reg om Woldemort se towerstaf weg te neem, as hy deur minstens dertig Doodseters omsingel is? Hy het nog niks geleer wat hom enigszins hiervoor toerus nie. Hy weet dat die een ding waarteen Moodie hulle nog altyd gewaarsku het, hom in die gesig staar . . . die onstuitbare Avada Kedavra-vloek – en Woldemort is reg – sy ma is nie hier om soos die vorige keer vir hom te sterf nie . . . hy is heeltemal weerloos . . .

“Ons buig vir mekaar, Harry,” sê Woldemort terwyl hy effens buig maar sy slangagtige gesig op Harry gerig hou. “Komaan, waar's jou maniere . . . Dompeldorius sal wil hê dat jy goeie maniere toon . . . buig vir die dood, Harry . . .”

Weer lag die Doodseters. Woldemort se liplose mond glimlag. Harry buig nie. Hy gaan nie toelaat dat Woldemort met hom speel voor hy hom doodmaak nie . . . hy gaan hom nie daardie bevrediging gee nie . . .

“Ek het gesê, *buig*,” sê Woldemort en hy lig sy towerstaf – en Harry voel hoe sy ruggraat knak asof ’n groot onsigbare hand hom meedoënloos vooroor druk. Die Doodseters lag harder as ooit.

“Baie mooi,” sê Woldemort sag en toe hy sy towerstaf lig, verdwyn die drukking op Harry terselfdertyd. “En nou, kyk my in die oë soos ’n man . . . fier en trots, soos jou pa gesterf het . . .

“En hiermee – die tweegeveg.”

Woldemort lig sy towerstaf en voor Harry iets kan doen om homself te verdedig, voor hy selfs kan beweeg, tref die Cruciatus-vloek hom weer eens. Die pyn is so intens, so allesoorheersend, dat hy nie meer weet waar hy is nie . . . witwarm messe boor deur elke sentimeter van sy vel, sy kop gaan sekerlik oopbars van die pyn; hy skree harder as wat hy nog ooit in sy lewe geskree het –

Dan is dit oor. Harry rol om en skarrel orent; hy bewe net so onbedaarlik soos Wurmstert toe hy sy hand afgesny het; hy steier sywaarts tot teen die muur van Doodseters wat hom wegstoot, terug na Woldemort toe.

“’n Klein blaaskansie,” sê Woldemort en sy spleetagtige neusgate gaan oop en toe van opwinding, “’n verposing . . . dit was seer, nè, Harry? Jy wil nie hê dat ek dit weer moet doen nie, wil jy?”

Harry antwoord nie. Hy gaan soos Cedric sterf, daardie genadelose rooi oë sê dit vir hom . . . hy gaan sterf en daar is niks wat hy daaraan kan doen nie . . . maar hy gaan nie saamspeel nie. Hy gaan nie vir Woldemort gehoorsaam nie . . . hy sal nie smee nie . . .

“Ek het jou gevra of jy wil hê dat ek dit weer moet doen?” sê Woldemort sag. “Antwoord my! *Imperio!*”

En Harry ervaar, vir die derde keer in sy lewe, die gevoel dat alle gedagtes uit sy brein gegee is . . . a, dit is salig om nie te dink nie, dis asof hy sweef, droom . . . sê net “nee” . . . sê “nee” . . . antwoord net “nee” . . .

Ek sal nie, sê ’n sterker stem agter in sy kop. Ek sal nie antwoord nie.

Antwoord net “nee” . . .

Ek sal dit nie doen nie, ek sal dit nie sê nie . . .

Antwoord net “nee” . . .

“EK SAL NIE!”

Die woorde bars oor Harry se lippe; hulle eggo oor die begraafplaas en die gevoel dat hy droom, verdwyn so vinnig asof koue water oor hom gegooi is – terug storm die pyne wat die Cruciatusvloek oor sy hele liggaam gelaat het – terug vloei die besef van waar hy is en wat op hom wag . . .

“Jy wil nie?” sê Woldemort sag en nou lag die Doodseters nie. “Jy wil nie ‘nee’ sê nie? Harry, gehoorsaamheid is ’n deug wat ek jou sal moet leer voor jy sterf . . . dalk nog ’n dosis pyn?”

Woldemort lig sy towerstaf, maar hierdie keer is Harry gereed vir hom; met die reflekse wat uit sy Kwiddiekoefening gebore is, slinger hy hom-

self sywaarts op die grond; hy rol agter Woldemort se pa se marmergrafsteen in en hoor hoe dit kraak toe die vloek dit tref.

“Ons speel nie wegkruipertjie nie, Harry,” sê Woldemort se sagte, koue stem wat al nader kom terwyl die Doodseters lag. “Jy kan nie vir my wegkruip nie. Beteken dit dat jy moeg is van die tweegeveg? Beteken dit dat jy wil hê ek moet met jou klaarspeel, Harry? Kom uit, Harry . . . kom uit en speel . . . dit sal gou wees . . . dit kan selfs pynloos wees . . . ek weet nie . . . ek het nog nooit gesterf nie . . .”

Harry hurk agter die grafsteen en hy weet dat dit die einde is. Daar is geen hoop nie . . . niemand wat hom kan help nie. Toe hy hoor hoe Woldemort steeds nader kom, weet hy net een ding, iets wat anderkant vrees of rede lê – hy gaan nie hurkend soos ’n kind wat wegkruipertjie speel sterf nie; hy gaan nie sterf neergekniel aan Woldemort se voete nie . . . as hy sterf, gaan hy regop staan soos sy pa en hy gaan verdedig, selfs al is geen verdediging moontlik nie . . .

Voor Woldemort sy slangagtige gesig om die grafsteen kan steek, staan Harry op . . . hy gryp sy towerstaf stewig in sy hand vas, hou dit uitgestrek voor hom en slinger homself om die grafsteen sodat hy Woldemort in die oë kyk.

Woldemort is gereed vir hom. Toe Harry “*Expelliarmus!*” skree, gil Woldemort, “*Avada Kedavra!*”

’n Groen ligstraal bars uit Woldemort se towerstaf net toe ’n rooi straal uit Harry s’n skiet – hulle ontmoet in die lug – en skielik vibreer Harry se towerstaf asof ’n elektriese lading daardeur vloei; sy hand trek krampagtig daarom saam; hy kan dit nie los nie, selfs al wil hy ook – nou verbind ’n smal ligstraal die twee towerstawwe, dis nóg rooi, nóg groen, maar ’n helder, diep goue kleur – en Harry wat die straal vol verbasing volg, sien dat Woldemort se lang wit vingers ook ’n towerstaf vashou wat ruk en skud.

En toe – niks kon Harry hierop voorberei het nie – voel hy hoe sy voete die grond verlaat. Hy en Woldemort styg saam die lug in, hul towerstawwe word nog steeds deur daardie glimmende goue draad lig verbind. Hulle sweef oor die grafsteen van Woldemort se vader en kom tot rus op ’n stuk grond wat oop is en waar daar geen grafte is nie . . . die Doodseters skreeu, roep na Woldemort vir opdragte, kom nader en maak weer ’n kring om Harry en Woldemort. Die slang seil om hul hakke rond en party van hulle hou hul towerstawwe gereed –

Die goue draad wat Harry en Woldemort verbind, versplinter, hoewel die towerstawwe nog steeds aan mekaar verbind is; duisende uitspruitsels maak nou boë hoog oor Harry en Woldemort, kruis en dwars, tot ’n goue, koepelvormige web van lig hulle omsluit waaragter die Doodseters soos jakkalse sirkel, hul krete nou vreemd gesmoord . . .

“Moet niks doen nie!” skree Woldemort vir die Doodseters en Harry

sien dat sy rooi oë wyd is van verbasing oor wat gebeur, sien hoe hy veg om die ligdraad wat sy towerstaf nog steeds met Harry s'n verbind, te breek; Harry hou sy towerstaf nog stywer met albei hande vas en die goue draad bly heel. "Moet niks doen nie, tensy ek julle beveel!" skreeu Woldemort vir die Doodseters.

En toe vul 'n onaardse en wonderskone geluid die lug . . . dit kom uit elke draad van die met lig geweefde web wat om Harry en Woldemort tril. Dit is 'n geluid wat Harry herken, hoewel hy dit nog net een keer vantevore in sy lewe gehoor het . . . die lied van die feniks . . .

Vir Harry is dit 'n lied van hoop . . . die mooiste en mees welkome ding wat hy nog ooit gehoor het . . . hy voel asof die lied binne-in hom is, pleks van bloot om hom . . . dit is die geluid wat hy met Dompeldorius assosieer en dis asof 'n vriend in sy oor praat . . .

Moenie die band breek nie.

Ek weet, antwoord Harry die musiek, ek weet ek moenie . . . maar hy het dit skaars gedink of dit word al moeiliker om te doen. Sy towerstaf vibreer nog kragtiger as tevore . . . en nou begin die band tussen hom en Woldemort ook verander . . . dis asof groot ligkorrels op en af langs die draad wat die towerstawwe verbind, beweeg – Harry voel hoe sy towerstaf in sy hand ruk toe die ligkorrels stadig en bestendig na sy kant toe kom . . . die rigting waarin die straal beweeg, is nou van Woldemort na hom toe, en hy voel hoe sy towerstaf van woede sidder . . .

Toe die naaste ligkorrel naby aan die punt van Harry se towerstaf kom, word die hout onder sy vingers so warm dat hy bang is dat dit in vlamme gaan uitbars. Hoe nader die korrel kom, hoe erger vibreer Harry se towerstaf; hy is seker sy towerstaf sal kontak nie oorleef nie; dit voel asof dit onder sy vingers uitmekaar gaan spat . . .

Hy fokus met elke greintjie konsentrasie in sy brein op die korrel in 'n poging om dit terug na Woldemort toe te dwing, sy ore is gevul met die lied van die feniks, sy oë is vol woede, vasgenaël . . . en die korrels kom stadig, baie stadig tot stilstand en toe, net so stadig, begin hulle in die teenoorgestelde rigting beweeg . . . en nou is dit Woldemort se towerstaf wat baie erg vibreer . . . Woldemort wat verbaas en amper bang lyk . . .

Een van die ligkorrels bewe enkele sentimeters van die punt van Woldemort se towerstaf af. Harry weet nie mooi hoekom hy dit doen nie, weet nie wat hy sal bereik . . . maar nou konsentreer hy soos nog nooit tevore in sy lewe nie om daardie ligkorrel terug in Woldemort se towerstaf te dwing . . . en stadig . . . baie stadig . . . beweeg dit langs die goue draad . . . bewe vir 'n oomblik . . . en gaan in . . .

Onmiddellik uiter Woldemort se towerstaf galmende krete van pyn . . . toe – Woldemort se rooi oë word wyd van skok – verskyn 'n digte, rokerige hand uit die punt en verdwyn . . . die spook van die hand wat hy vir Wurmstert gemaak het . . . nog krete van pyn . . . en toe kom iets baie

groters uit die punt van Woldemort se towerstaf, 'n groot, gryserige iets wat lyk asof dit van soliede, digte rook gemaak is . . . dis 'n kop . . . nou 'n borskas en arms . . . die bolyf van Cedric Diggory.

As Harry sy towerstaf ooit van skok sou laat los, sou dit nou wees, maar instink laat hom nog stywer vasklou sodat die goue ligdraad heel bly selfs toe die digte, gryns spook van Cedric Diggory (is dit 'n spook? Dit lyk so solied) in sy geheel uit die punt van Woldemort se towerstaf peul asof dit deur 'n baie smal tonnel druk . . . en hierdie vorm van Cedric staan op en kyk op en af langs die goue draad van lig en toe praat dit.

“Vasbyt, Harry,” sê dit.

Die stem eggo veraf. Harry kyk na Woldemort . . . sy wydgerekte, rooi oë lyk nog steeds geskok . . . hy het dit net so min soos Harry verwag . . . en baie dofweg hoor Harry die verskrikte krete van die Doodseters wat buite om die goue koepel sluip . . .

Nog pynkrete vanuit die towerstaf . . . en dan verskyn nog iets uit sy punt . . . die digte skaduwee van 'n tweede kop wat gou deur arms en 'n bolyf gevolg word . . . en 'n ou man wat Harry een keer in 'n droom gesien het, stoot homself uit die punt van die towerstaf net soos Cedric gemaak het . . . en sy spook, oftewel, sy skaduwee, of wat ook al, daal neer langs Cedric s'n en kyk so ietwat verbaas na Harry en Woldemort en na die goue web en die verbinde towerstawwe terwyl hy op sy kiere leun . . .

“Dan was hy 'n ware towenaar, hè?” sê die ou man, sy oë op Woldemort. “Het my doodgemaak, daardie een . . . sit jou teen, boet . . .”

Maar alreeds verskyn 'n derde kop . . . en hierdie kop, so gryns soos 'n rokerige standbeeld, is 'n vrou s'n . . . albei Harry se arms bewe nou soos hy worstel om sy towerstaf stil te hou. Hy sien hoe sy op die grond neerdaal en soos die ander starend regop kom . . .

Die skaduwee van Bertha Jurgens bekyk die tweestryd voor haar met wydgerekte oë.

“Moenie nou ingee nie!” roep sy uit en haar stem eggo net soos Cedric s'n asof dit van baie ver kom. “Moenie dat hy jou kry nie, Harry – moenie laat los nie!”

Sy en die ander twee skaduagtige figure stap nou om en om die binnekant van die goue web terwyl die Doodseters buite-om rondsweef . . . Woldemort se dooie slagoffers fluister terwyl hulle om die twee vegtendes sirkel, fluister woorde van bemoediging vir Harry en sis woorde wat Harry nie kan hoor nie vir Woldemort.

Nou verskyn nog 'n kop uit die punt van Woldemort se towerstaf . . . en toe Harry dit sien, weet hy wie dit sal wees . . . hy weet asof hy dit verwag het reeds van die oomblik toe Cedric uit die towerstaf verskyn het . . . weet, omdat die man wat verskyn dié een is aan wie hy vannag meer gedink het as aan enigiemand anders . . .

Die rokerige skaduwee van 'n lang man met slordige hare daal net soos

Bertha grond toe, kom orent en kyk na hom . . . en Harry, wie se arms nou onbedaarlik bewee, kyk terug in sy pa se spokerige gesig.

“Jou ma is op pad . . .” sê hy sag. “Sy wil jou sien . . . alles sal goed gaan . . . hou net uit . . .”

Toe kom sy . . . eers haar kop, toe haar liggaam . . . ’n jong vrou met lang hare, die rokerige, skaduagtige vorm van Lily Potter verskyn uit die punt van Woldemort se towerstaf, daal grond toe en kom soos haar man orent. Sy loop tot by Harry, kyk af na hom en praat in dieselfde veraf eggo soos al die ander, maar sag sodat Woldemort, wie se gesig nou doodsbleeke van vrees is terwyl sy slagoffers om hom sluip, haar nie kan hoor nie . . .

“Wanneer die verbinding breek, sal ons net ’n rukkie kan talm . . . maar dit sal jou tyd gee . . . jy moet by die Poortsleutel kom, dit sal jou terugneem Hogwarts toe . . . verstaan jy, Harry?”

“Ja,” hyg Harry wat moet veg om beheer oor sy towerstaf te behou wat nou in sy vingers rondglip en gly.

“Harry . . .” fluister die figuur van Cedric, “neem my liggaam terug, sal jy? Neem my liggaam na my ouers toe . . .”

“Ek sal,” sê Harry wie se gesig vertrek is van die inspanning om die towerstaf vas te hou.

“Doen dit nou,” fluister sy pa se stem. “Wees gereed om te hardloop . . . doen dit nou . . .”

“NOU!” gil Harry wat in elk geval nie dink dat hy die towerstaf langer sal kan vashou nie – hy pluk dit boontoe met ’n geweldige rukbeweging en die goue draad breek; die ligkou verdwyn, die lied van die feniks sterf weg – maar die skaduagtige figure van Woldemort se slagoffers verdwyn nie – hulle beweeg nader aan Woldemort sodat hy nie vir Harry kan sien nie –

Harry hardloop soos hy nog nooit in sy lewe gehardloop het nie. Hy loop twee Doodseters uit die grond, hy sigsag agter die grafstene verby, voel hoe hul vloeke hom volg, hoor hoe hulle die grafstene tref – hy ontwyk vloeke en grafte en pyl op Cedric se liggaam af, onbewus van die pyn in sy been, sy hele wese gefokus op wat hy moet doen –

“*Bedwelm hom!*” hoor hy Woldemort skree.

’n Paar tree van Cedric af duik Harry agter ’n marmerengel weg om die rooi ligstrale te vermy en sien hoe die punt van die vlerk aan skerwe spat toe die towerspreuke dit tref. Hy hou sy towerstaf nog stywer vas en storm agter die engel uit –

“*Dwarsboom!*” bulder hy en wys wildweg met sy towerstaf oor sy skouer na die Doodseters wat agter hom aankom.

’n Gesmoorde kreet laat hom dink dat hy ten minste een van hulle getref het, maar daar is nie tyd om om te kyk nie; toe hy nog ontploffings uit towerstawwe agter hom hoor, spring hy oor die Beker en duik. Nog

ligstrale vlieg oor sy kop toe hy val, sy hand uitsteek en Cedric aan die arm gryp –

“Gee pad! Ek gaan hom doodmaak! Hy’s myne!” gil Woldemort.

Harry se hand sluit om Cedric se pols; daar is een grafsteen tussen hom en Woldemort, maar Cedric is te swaar om te dra en die Beker is buite bereik –

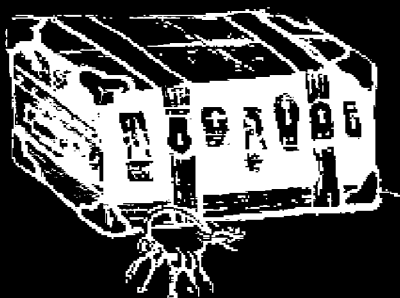
Woldemort se rooi oë vlam in die donkerte. Harry sien hoe sy mond in ’n glimlag krul, sien hoe hy sy towerstaf lig.

“Accio!” gil Harry en rig sy towerstaf op die Drietowenaarstrofee.

Dit vlieg deur die lug en seil na hom toe – Harry vang dit aan die oor –

Hy hoor hoe Woldemort van woede skree op dieselfde oomblik dat hy die pluk agter sy naeltjie voel wat beteken dat die Poortsleutel werk – dit sleur hom mee in ’n warreling van wind en kleur. Cedric is by hom . . . hulle gaan terug . . .

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



VERITASERUM

Harry felt himself slam flat into the ground; his face was pressed into grass; the smell of it filled his nostrils. He had closed his eyes while the Portkey transported him, and he kept them closed now. He did not move. All the breath seemed to have been knocked out of him; his head was swimming so badly he felt as though the ground beneath him were swaying like the deck of a ship. To hold himself steady, he tightened his hold on the two things he was still clutching: the smooth, cold handle of the Triwizard Cup and Cedric's body. He felt as though he would slide away into the blackness gathering at the edges of his brain if he let go of either of them. Shock and exhaustion kept him on the ground, breathing in the smell of the grass, waiting . . . waiting for someone to do something . . . something to happen . . . and all the while, his scar burned dully on his forehead. . . .

A torrent of sound deafened and confused him; there were voices

everywhere, footsteps, screams. . . . He remained where he was, his face screwed up against the noise, as though it were a nightmare that would pass. . . .

Then a pair of hands seized him roughly and turned him over.

“Harry! *Harry!*”

He opened his eyes.

He was looking up at the starry sky, and Albus Dumbledore was crouched over him. The dark shadows of a crowd of people pressed in around them, pushing nearer; Harry felt the ground beneath his head reverberating with their footsteps.

He had come back to the edge of the maze. He could see the stands rising above him, the shapes of people moving in them, the stars above.

Harry let go of the Cup, but he clutched Cedric to him even more tightly. He raised his free hand and seized Dumbledore’s wrist, while Dumbledore’s face swam in and out of focus.

“He’s back,” Harry whispered. “He’s back. Voldemort.”

“What’s going on? What’s happened?”

The face of Cornelius Fudge appeared upside down over Harry; it looked white, appalled.

“My God — Diggory!” it whispered. “Dumbledore — he’s dead!”

The words were repeated, the shadowy figures pressing in on them gasped it to those around them . . . and then others shouted it — screeched it — into the night — “He’s dead!” “He’s *dead!*” “Cedric Diggory! *Dead!*”

“Harry, let go of him,” he heard Fudge’s voice say, and he felt fingers trying to pry him from Cedric’s limp body, but Harry

wouldn't let him go. Then Dumbledore's face, which was still blurred and misted, came closer.

"Harry, you can't help him now. It's over. Let go."

"He wanted me to bring him back," Harry muttered — it seemed important to explain this. "He wanted me to bring him back to his parents. . . ."

"That's right, Harry . . . just let go now. . . ."

Dumbledore bent down, and with extraordinary strength for a man so old and thin, raised Harry from the ground and set him on his feet. Harry swayed. His head was pounding. His injured leg would no longer support his weight. The crowd around them jostled, fighting to get closer, pressing darkly in on him — "What's happened?" "What's wrong with him?" "*Diggory's dead!*"

"He'll need to go to the hospital wing!" Fudge was saying loudly. "He's ill, he's injured — Dumbledore, Diggory's parents, they're here, they're in the stands. . . ."

"I'll take Harry, Dumbledore, I'll take him —"

"No, I would prefer —"

"Dumbledore, Amos Diggory's running . . . he's coming over. . . . Don't you think you should tell him — before he sees —?"

"Harry, stay here —"

Girls were screaming, sobbing hysterically. . . . The scene flickered oddly before Harry's eyes. . . .

"It's all right, son, I've got you . . . come on . . . hospital wing. . . ."

"Dumbledore said stay," said Harry thickly, the pounding in his scar making him feel as though he was about to throw up; his vision was blurring worse than ever.

“You need to lie down. . . . Come on now. . . .”

Someone larger and stronger than he was was half pulling, half carrying him through the frightened crowd. Harry heard people gasping, screaming, and shouting as the man supporting him pushed a path through them, taking him back to the castle. Across the lawn, past the lake and the Durmstrang ship, Harry heard nothing but the heavy breathing of the man helping him walk.

“What happened, Harry?” the man asked at last as he lifted Harry up the stone steps. *Clunk. Clunk. Clunk.* It was Mad-Eye Moody.

“Cup was a Portkey,” said Harry as they crossed the entrance hall. “Took me and Cedric to a graveyard . . . and Voldemort was there . . . Lord Voldemort . . .”

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. Up the marble stairs . . .

“The Dark Lord was there? What happened then?”

“Killed Cedric . . . they killed Cedric. . . .”

“And then?”

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. Along the corridor . . .

“Made a potion . . . got his body back. . . .”

“The Dark Lord got his body back? He’s returned?”

“And the Death Eaters came . . . and then we dueled. . . .”

“You dueled with the Dark Lord?”

“Got away . . . my wand . . . did something funny. . . . I saw my mum and dad . . . they came out of his wand. . . .”

“In here, Harry . . . in here, and sit down. . . . You’ll be all right now . . . drink this. . . .”

Harry heard a key scrape in a lock and felt a cup being pushed into

his hands.

“Drink it . . . you’ll feel better . . . come on, now, Harry, I need to know exactly what happened. . . .”

Moody helped tip the stuff down Harry’s throat; he coughed, a peppery taste burning his throat. Moody’s office came into sharper focus, and so did Moody himself. . . . He looked as white as Fudge had looked, and both eyes were fixed unblinkingly upon Harry’s face.

“Voldemort’s back, Harry? You’re sure he’s back? How did he do it?”

“He took stuff from his father’s grave, and from Wormtail, and me,” said Harry. His head felt clearer; his scar wasn’t hurting so badly; he could now see Moody’s face distinctly, even though the office was dark. He could still hear screaming and shouting from the distant Quidditch field.

“What did the Dark Lord take from you?” said Moody.

“Blood,” said Harry, raising his arm. His sleeve was ripped where Wormtail’s dagger had torn it.

Moody let out his breath in a long, low hiss.

“And the Death Eaters? They returned?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “Loads of them . . .”

“How did he treat them?” Moody asked quietly. “Did he forgive them?”

But Harry had suddenly remembered. He should have told Dumbledore, he should have said it straightaway —

“There’s a Death Eater at Hogwarts! There’s a Death Eater here — they put my name in the Goblet of Fire, they made sure I got through to the end —”

Harry tried to get up, but Moody pushed him back down.

“I know who the Death Eater is,” he said quietly.

“Karkaroff?” said Harry wildly. “Where is he? Have you got him? Is he locked up?”

“Karkaroff?” said Moody with an odd laugh. “Karkaroff fled tonight, when he felt the Dark Mark burn upon his arm. He betrayed too many faithful supporters of the Dark Lord to wish to meet them . . . but I doubt he will get far. The Dark Lord has ways of tracking his enemies.”

“Karkaroff’s *gone*? He ran away? But then — he didn’t put my name in the goblet?”

“No,” said Moody slowly. “No, he didn’t. It was I who did that.”

Harry heard, but didn’t believe.

“No, you didn’t,” he said. “You didn’t do that . . . you can’t have done . . .”

“I assure you I did,” said Moody, and his magical eye swung around and fixed upon the door, and Harry knew he was making sure that there was no one outside it. At the same time, Moody drew out his wand and pointed it at Harry.

“He forgave them, then?” he said. “The Death Eaters who went free? The ones who escaped Azkaban?”

“What?” said Harry.

He was looking at the wand Moody was pointing at him. This was a bad joke, it had to be.

“I asked you,” said Moody quietly, “whether he forgave the scum who never even went to look for him. Those treacherous cowards who wouldn’t even brave Azkaban for him. The faithless, worthless

bits of filth who were brave enough to cavort in masks at the Quidditch World Cup, but fled at the sight of the Dark Mark when I fired it into the sky.”

“*You* fired . . . What are you talking about . . . ?”

“I told you, Harry . . . I told you. If there’s one thing I hate more than any other, it’s a Death Eater who walked free. They turned their backs on my master when he needed them most. I expected him to punish them. I expected him to torture them. Tell me he hurt them, Harry. . . .” Moody’s face was suddenly lit with an insane smile. “Tell me he told them that I, I alone remained faithful . . . prepared to risk everything to deliver to him the one thing he wanted above all . . . *you*.”

“You didn’t . . . it — it can’t be you. . . .”

“Who put your name in the Goblet of Fire, under the name of a different school? I did. Who frightened off every person I thought might try to hurt you or prevent you from winning the tournament? I did. Who nudged Hagrid into showing you the dragons? I did. Who helped you see the only way you could beat the dragon? *I did*.”

Moody’s magical eye had now left the door. It was fixed upon Harry. His lopsided mouth leered more widely than ever.

“It hasn’t been easy, Harry, guiding you through these tasks without arousing suspicion. I have had to use every ounce of cunning I possess, so that my hand would not be detectable in your success. Dumbledore would have been very suspicious if you had managed everything too easily. As long as you got into that maze, preferably with a decent head start — then, I knew, I would have a chance of getting rid of the other champions and leaving your way clear. But I

also had to contend with your stupidity. The second task . . . that was when I was most afraid we would fail. I was keeping watch on you, Potter. I knew you hadn't worked out the egg's clue, so I had to give you another hint —"

"You didn't," Harry said hoarsely. "Cedric gave me the clue —"

"Who told Cedric to open it underwater? I did. I trusted that he would pass the information on to you. Decent people are so easy to manipulate, Potter. I was sure Cedric would want to repay you for telling him about the dragons, and so he did. But even then, Potter, even then you seemed likely to fail. I was watching all the time . . . all those hours in the library. Didn't you realize that the book you needed was in your dormitory all along? I planted it there early on, I gave it to the Longbottom boy, don't you remember? *Magical Water Plants of the Mediterranean*. It would have told you all you needed to know about gillyweed. I expected you to ask everyone and anyone you could for help. Longbottom would have told you in an instant. But you did not . . . you did not. . . . You have a streak of pride and independence that might have ruined all.

"So what could I do? Feed you information from another innocent source. You told me at the Yule Ball a house-elf called Dobby had given you a Christmas present. I called the elf to the staffroom to collect some robes for cleaning. I staged a loud conversation with Professor McGonagall about the hostages who had been taken, and whether Potter would think to use gillyweed. And your little elf friend ran straight to Snape's office and then hurried to find you. . . ."

Moody's wand was still pointing directly at Harry's heart. Over his shoulder, foggy shapes were moving in the Foe-Glass on the wall.

“You were so long in that lake, Potter, I thought you had drowned. But luckily, Dumbledore took your idiocy for nobility, and marked you high for it. I breathed again.

“You had an easier time of it than you should have in that maze tonight, of course,” said Moody. “I was patrolling around it, able to see through the outer hedges, able to curse many obstacles out of your way. I Stunned Fleur Delacour as she passed. I put the Imperius Curse on Krum, so that he would finish Diggory and leave your path to the Cup clear.”

Harry stared at Moody. He just didn’t see how this could be. . . . Dumbledore’s friend, the famous Auror . . . the one who had caught so many Death Eaters . . . It made no sense . . . no sense at all. . . .

The foggy shapes in the Foe-Glass were sharpening, had become more distinct. Harry could see the outlines of three people over Moody’s shoulder, moving closer and closer. But Moody wasn’t watching them. His magical eye was upon Harry.

“The Dark Lord didn’t manage to kill you, Potter, and he *so* wanted to,” whispered Moody. “Imagine how he will reward me when he finds I have done it for him. I gave you to him — the thing he needed above all to regenerate — and then I killed you for him. I will be honored beyond all other Death Eaters. I will be his dearest, his closest supporter . . . closer than a son. . . .”

Moody’s normal eye was bulging, the magical eye fixed upon Harry. The door was barred, and Harry knew he would never reach his own wand in time. . . .

“The Dark Lord and I,” said Moody, and he looked completely insane now, towering over Harry, leering down at him, “have much in

common. Both of us, for instance, had very disappointing fathers . . . very disappointing indeed. Both of us suffered the indignity, Harry, of being named after those fathers. And both of us had the pleasure . . . the very great pleasure . . . of killing our fathers to ensure the continued rise of the Dark Order!”

“You’re mad,” Harry said — he couldn’t stop himself — “you’re mad!”

“Mad, am I?” said Moody, his voice rising uncontrollably. “We’ll see! We’ll see who’s mad, now that the Dark Lord has returned, with me at his side! He is back, Harry Potter, you did not conquer him — and now — I conquer you!”

Moody raised his wand, he opened his mouth; Harry plunged his own hand into his robes —

“*Stupefy!*” There was a blinding flash of red light, and with a great splintering and crashing, the door of Moody’s office was blasted apart —

Moody was thrown backward onto the office floor. Harry, still staring at the place where Moody’s face had been, saw Albus Dumbledore, Professor Snape, and Professor McGonagall looking back at him out of the Foe-Glass. He looked around and saw the three of them standing in the doorway, Dumbledore in front, his wand outstretched.

At that moment, Harry fully understood for the first time why people said Dumbledore was the only wizard Voldemort had ever feared. The look upon Dumbledore’s face as he stared down at the unconscious form of Mad-Eye Moody was more terrible than Harry could have ever imagined. There was no benign smile upon

Dumbledore's face, no twinkle in the eyes behind the spectacles. There was cold fury in every line of the ancient face; a sense of power radiated from Dumbledore as though he were giving off burning heat.

He stepped into the office, placed a foot underneath Moody's unconscious body, and kicked him over onto his back, so that his face was visible. Snape followed him, looking into the Foe-Glass, where his own face was still visible, glaring into the room. Professor McGonagall went straight to Harry.

"Come along, Potter," she whispered. The thin line of her mouth was twitching as though she was about to cry. "Come along . . . hospital wing . . ."

"No," said Dumbledore sharply.

"Dumbledore, he ought to — look at him — he's been through enough tonight —"

"He will stay, Minerva, because he needs to understand," said Dumbledore curtly. "Understanding is the first step to acceptance, and only with acceptance can there be recovery. He needs to know who has put him through the ordeal he has suffered tonight, and why."

"Moody," Harry said. He was still in a state of complete disbelief. "How can it have been Moody?"

"This is not Alastor Moody," said Dumbledore quietly. "You have never known Alastor Moody. The real Moody would not have removed you from my sight after what happened tonight. The moment he took you, I knew — and I followed."

Dumbledore bent down over Moody's limp form and put a hand inside his robes. He pulled out Moody's hip flask and a set of keys

on a ring. Then he turned to Professors McGonagall and Snape.

“Severus, please fetch me the strongest Truth Potion you possess, and then go down to the kitchens and bring up the house-elf called Winky. Minerva, kindly go down to Hagrid’s house, where you will find a large black dog sitting in the pumpkin patch. Take the dog up to my office, tell him I will be with him shortly, then come back here.”

If either Snape or McGonagall found these instructions peculiar, they hid their confusion. Both turned at once and left the office. Dumbledore walked over to the trunk with seven locks, fitted the first key in the lock, and opened it. It contained a mass of spellbooks. Dumbledore closed the trunk, placed a second key in the second lock, and opened the trunk again. The spellbooks had vanished; this time it contained an assortment of broken Sneakoscopes, some parchment and quills, and what looked like a silvery Invisibility Cloak. Harry watched, astounded, as Dumbledore placed the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth keys in their respective locks, reopening the trunk, and each time revealing different contents. Then he placed the seventh key in the lock, threw open the lid, and Harry let out a cry of amazement.

He was looking down into a kind of pit, an underground room, and lying on the floor some ten feet below, apparently fast asleep, thin and starved in appearance, was the real Mad-Eye Moody. His wooden leg was gone, the socket that should have held the magical eye looked empty beneath its lid, and chunks of his grizzled hair were missing. Harry stared, thunderstruck, between the sleeping Moody in the trunk and the unconscious Moody lying on the floor of the office.

Dumbledore climbed into the trunk, lowered himself, and fell lightly onto the floor beside the sleeping Moody. He bent over him.

“Stunned — controlled by the Imperius Curse — very weak,” he said. “Of course, they would have needed to keep him alive. Harry, throw down the imposter’s cloak — he’s freezing. Madam Pomfrey will need to see him, but he seems in no immediate danger.”

Harry did as he was told; Dumbledore covered Moody in the cloak, tucked it around him, and clambered out of the trunk again. Then he picked up the hip flask that stood upon the desk, unscrewed it, and turned it over. A thick glutinous liquid splattered onto the office floor.

“Polyjuice Potion, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “You see the simplicity of it, and the brilliance. For Moody never *does* drink except from his hip flask, he’s well known for it. The imposter needed, of course, to keep the real Moody close by, so that he could continue making the potion. You see his hair . . .” Dumbledore looked down on the Moody in the trunk. “The imposter has been cutting it off all year, see where it is uneven? But I think, in the excitement of tonight, our fake Moody might have forgotten to take it as frequently as he should have done . . . on the hour . . . every hour. . . . We shall see.”

Dumbledore pulled out the chair at the desk and sat down upon it, his eyes fixed upon the unconscious Moody on the floor. Harry stared at him too. Minutes passed in silence. . . .

Then, before Harry’s very eyes, the face of the man on the floor began to change. The scars were disappearing, the skin was becoming smooth; the mangled nose became whole and started to shrink. The long mane of grizzled gray hair was withdrawing into the scalp and turning the color of straw. Suddenly, with a loud *clunk*, the

wooden leg fell away as a normal leg regrew in its place; next moment, the magical eyeball had popped out of the man's face as a real eye replaced it; it rolled away across the floor and continued to swivel in every direction.

Harry saw a man lying before him, pale-skinned, slightly freckled, with a mop of fair hair. He knew who he was. He had seen him in Dumbledore's Pensieve, had watched him being led away from court by the dementors, trying to convince Mr. Crouch that he was innocent . . . but he was lined around the eyes now and looked much older. . . .

There were hurried footsteps outside in the corridor. Snape had returned with Winky at his heels. Professor McGonagall was right behind them.

"Crouch!" Snape said, stopping dead in the doorway. "Barty Crouch!"

"Good heavens," said Professor McGonagall, stopping dead and staring down at the man on the floor.

Filthy, disheveled, Winky peered around Snape's legs. Her mouth opened wide and she let out a piercing shriek.

"Master Barty, Master Barty, what is you doing here?"

She flung herself forward onto the young man's chest.

"You is killed him! You is killed him! You is killed Master's son!"

"He is simply Stunned, Winky," said Dumbledore. "Step aside, please. Severus, you have the potion?"

Snape handed Dumbledore a small glass bottle of completely clear liquid: the Veritaserum with which he had threatened Harry in class. Dumbledore got up, bent over the man on the floor, and pulled him

into a sitting position against the wall beneath the Foe-Glass, in which the reflections of Dumbledore, Snape, and McGonagall were still glaring down upon them all. Winky remained on her knees, trembling, her hands over her face. Dumbledore forced the man's mouth open and poured three drops inside it. Then he pointed his wand at the man's chest and said, "*Rennervate.*"

Crouch's son opened his eyes. His face was slack, his gaze unfocused. Dumbledore knelt before him, so that their faces were level.

"Can you hear me?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

The man's eyelids flickered.

"Yes," he muttered.

"I would like you to tell us," said Dumbledore softly, "how you came to be here. How did you escape from Azkaban?"

Crouch took a deep, shuddering breath, then began to speak in a flat, expressionless voice.

"My mother saved me. She knew she was dying. She persuaded my father to rescue me as a last favor to her. He loved her as he had never loved me. He agreed. They came to visit me. They gave me a draught of Polyjuice Potion containing one of my mother's hairs. She took a draught of Polyjuice Potion containing one of my hairs. We took on each other's appearance."

Winky was shaking her head, trembling.

"Say no more, Master Barty, say no more, you is getting your father into trouble!"

But Crouch took another deep breath and continued in the same flat voice.

“The dementors are blind. They sensed one healthy, one dying person entering Azkaban. They sensed one healthy, one dying person leaving it. My father smuggled me out, disguised as my mother, in case any prisoners were watching through their doors.

“My mother died a short while afterward in Azkaban. She was careful to drink Polyjuice Potion until the end. She was buried under my name and bearing my appearance. Everyone believed her to be me.”

The man’s eyelids flickered.

“And what did your father do with you, when he had got you home?” said Dumbledore quietly.

“Staged my mother’s death. A quiet, private funeral. That grave is empty. The house-elf nursed me back to health. Then I had to be concealed. I had to be controlled. My father had to use a number of spells to subdue me. When I had recovered my strength, I thought only of finding my master . . . of returning to his service.”

“How did your father subdue you?” said Dumbledore.

“The Imperius Curse,” Crouch said. “I was under my father’s control. I was forced to wear an Invisibility Cloak day and night. I was always with the house-elf. She was my keeper and caretaker. She pitied me. She persuaded my father to give me occasional treats. Rewards for my good behavior.”

“Master Barty, Master Barty,” sobbed Winky through her hands. “You isn’t ought to tell them, we is getting in trouble. . . .”

“Did anybody ever discover that you were still alive?” said Dumbledore softly. “Did anyone know except your father and the house-elf?”

“Yes,” said Crouch, his eyelids flickering again. “A witch in my father’s office. Bertha Jorkins. She came to the house with papers for my father’s signature. He was not at home. Winky showed her inside and returned to the kitchen, to me. But Bertha Jorkins heard Winky talking to me. She came to investigate. She heard enough to guess who was hiding under the Invisibility Cloak. My father arrived home. She confronted him. He put a very powerful Memory Charm on her to make her forget what she’d found out. Too powerful. He said it damaged her memory permanently.”

“Why is she coming to nose into my master’s private business?” sobbed Winky. “Why isn’t she leaving us be?”

“Tell me about the Quidditch World Cup,” said Dumbledore.

“Winky talked my father into it,” said Crouch, still in the same monotonous voice. “She spent months persuading him. I had not left the house for years. I had loved Quidditch. Let him go, she said. He will be in his Invisibility Cloak. He can watch. Let him smell fresh air for once. She said my mother would have wanted it. She told my father that my mother had died to give me freedom. She had not saved me for a life of imprisonment. He agreed in the end.

“It was carefully planned. My father led me and Winky up to the Top Box early in the day. Winky was to say that she was saving a seat for my father. I was to sit there, invisible. When everyone had left the box, we would emerge. Winky would appear to be alone. Nobody would ever know.

“But Winky didn’t know that I was growing stronger. I was starting to fight my father’s Imperius Curse. There were times when I was almost myself again. There were brief periods when I seemed

outside his control. It happened, there, in the Top Box. It was like waking from a deep sleep. I found myself out in public, in the middle of the match, and I saw, in front of me, a wand sticking out of a boy's pocket. I had not been allowed a wand since before Azkaban. I stole it. Winky didn't know. Winky is frightened of heights. She had her face hidden."

"Master Barty, you bad boy!" whispered Winky, tears trickling between her fingers.

"So you took the wand," said Dumbledore, "and what did you do with it?"

"We went back to the tent," said Crouch. "Then we heard them. We heard the Death Eaters. The ones who had never been to Azkaban. The ones who had never suffered for my master. They had turned their backs on him. They were not enslaved, as I was. They were free to seek him, but they did not. They were merely making sport of Muggles. The sound of their voices awoke me. My mind was clearer than it had been in years. I was angry. I had the wand. I wanted to attack them for their disloyalty to my master. My father had left the tent; he had gone to free the Muggles. Winky was afraid to see me so angry. She used her own brand of magic to bind me to her. She pulled me from the tent, pulled me into the forest, away from the Death Eaters. I tried to hold her back. I wanted to return to the campsite. I wanted to show those Death Eaters what loyalty to the Dark Lord meant, and to punish them for their lack of it. I used the stolen wand to cast the Dark Mark into the sky.

"Ministry wizards arrived. They shot Stunning Spells everywhere. One of the spells came through the trees where Winky and I stood.

The bond connecting us was broken. We were both Stunned.

“When Winky was discovered, my father knew I must be nearby. He searched the bushes where she had been found and felt me lying there. He waited until the other Ministry members had left the forest. He put me back under the Imperius Curse and took me home. He dismissed Winky. She had failed him. She had let me acquire a wand. She had almost let me escape.”

Winky let out a wail of despair.

“Now it was just Father and I, alone in the house. And then . . . and then . . .” Crouch’s head rolled on his neck, and an insane grin spread across his face. “My master came for me.

“He arrived at our house late one night in the arms of his servant Wormtail. My master had found out that I was still alive. He had captured Bertha Jorkins in Albania. He had tortured her. She told him a great deal. She told him about the Triwizard Tournament. She told him the old Auror, Moody, was going to teach at Hogwarts. He tortured her until he broke through the Memory Charm my father had placed upon her. She told him I had escaped from Azkaban. She told him my father kept me imprisoned to prevent me from seeking my master. And so my master knew that I was still his faithful servant — perhaps the most faithful of all. My master conceived a plan, based upon the information Bertha had given him. He needed me. He arrived at our house near midnight. My father answered the door.”

The smile spread wider over Crouch’s face, as though recalling the sweetest memory of his life. Winky’s petrified brown eyes were visible through her fingers. She seemed too appalled to speak.

“It was very quick. My father was placed under the Imperius Curse

by my master. Now my father was the one imprisoned, controlled. My master forced him to go about his business as usual, to act as though nothing was wrong. And I was released. I awoke. I was myself again, alive as I hadn't been in years."

"And what did Lord Voldemort ask you to do?" said Dumbledore.

"He asked me whether I was ready to risk everything for him. I was ready. It was my dream, my greatest ambition, to serve him, to prove myself to him. He told me he needed to place a faithful servant at Hogwarts. A servant who would guide Harry Potter through the Triwizard Tournament without appearing to do so. A servant who would watch over Harry Potter. Ensure he reached the Triwizard Cup. Turn the Cup into a Portkey, which would take the first person to touch it to my master. But first —"

"You needed Alastor Moody," said Dumbledore. His blue eyes were blazing, though his voice remained calm.

"Wormtail and I did it. We had prepared the Polyjuice Potion beforehand. We journeyed to his house. Moody put up a struggle. There was a commotion. We managed to subdue him just in time. Forced him into a compartment of his own magical trunk. Took some of his hair and added it to the potion. I drank it; I became Moody's double. I took his leg and his eye. I was ready to face Arthur Weasley when he arrived to sort out the Muggles who had heard a disturbance. I made the dustbins move around the yard. I told Arthur Weasley I had heard intruders in my yard, who had set off the dustbins. Then I packed up Moody's clothes and Dark Detectors, put them in the trunk with Moody, and set off for Hogwarts. I kept him alive, under the Imperius Curse. I wanted to be able to question him. To find out

about his past, learn his habits, so that I could fool even Dumbledore. I also needed his hair to make the Polyjuice Potion. The other ingredients were easy. I stole boomslang skin from the dungeons. When the Potions master found me in his office, I said I was under orders to search it.”

“And what became of Wormtail after you attacked Moody?” said Dumbledore.

“Wormtail returned to care for my master, in my father’s house, and to keep watch over my father.”

“But your father escaped,” said Dumbledore.

“Yes. After a while he began to fight the Imperius Curse just as I had done. There were periods when he knew what was happening. My master decided it was no longer safe for my father to leave the house. He forced him to send letters to the Ministry instead. He made him write and say he was ill. But Wormtail neglected his duty. He was not watchful enough. My father escaped. My master guessed that he was heading for Hogwarts. My father was going to tell Dumbledore everything, to confess. He was going to admit that he had smuggled me from Azkaban.

“My master sent me word of my father’s escape. He told me to stop him at all costs. So I waited and watched. I used the map I had taken from Harry Potter. The map that had almost ruined everything.”

“Map?” said Dumbledore quickly. “What map is this?”

“Potter’s map of Hogwarts. Potter saw me on it. Potter saw me stealing more ingredients for the Polyjuice Potion from Snape’s office one night. He thought I was my father. We have the same first name. I took the map from Potter that night. I told him my father hated

Dark wizards. Potter believed my father was after Snape.

“For a week I waited for my father to arrive at Hogwarts. At last, one evening, the map showed my father entering the grounds. I pulled on my Invisibility Cloak and went down to meet him. He was walking around the edge of the forest. Then Potter came, and Krum. I waited. I could not hurt Potter; my master needed him. Potter ran to get Dumbledore. I Stunned Krum. I killed my father.”

“*Noooo!*” wailed Winky. “Master Barty, Master Barty, what is you saying?”

“You killed your father,” Dumbledore said, in the same soft voice. “What did you do with the body?”

“Carried it into the forest. Covered it with the Invisibility Cloak. I had the map with me. I watched Potter run into the castle. He met Snape. Dumbledore joined them. I watched Potter bringing Dumbledore out of the castle. I walked back out of the forest, doubled around behind them, went to meet them. I told Dumbledore Snape had told me where to come.

“Dumbledore told me to go and look for my father. I went back to my father’s body. Watched the map. When everyone was gone, I Transfigured my father’s body. He became a bone . . . I buried it, while wearing the Invisibility Cloak, in the freshly dug earth in front of Hagrid’s cabin.”

There was complete silence now, except for Winky’s continued sobs. Then Dumbledore said, “And tonight . . .”

“I offered to carry the Triwizard Cup into the maze before dinner,” whispered Barty Crouch. “Turned it into a Portkey. My master’s plan worked. He is returned to power and I will be honored by him

beyond the dreams of wizards.”

The insane smile lit his features once more, and his head drooped onto his shoulder as Winky wailed and sobbed at his side.

Veritaserum

Harry voel hoe hy plat op die grond neerslaan; sy gesig is in die gras gedruk; die geur daarvan vul sy neusgate. Hy het sy oë toegemaak terwyl die Poortsleutel hom weggevoer het en hy hou hulle nog steeds toe. Hy beweeg nie. Hy is winduit geslaan, sy kop draai so erg dat dit voel asof die grond onder hom soos 'n skip heen en weer wieg. In 'n poging om homself te bestendig, verstewig hy sy greep op die twee goed wat hy nog steeds vasklou – die gladde, koue oor van die Drietowenaarstrofee en Cedric se liggaam. Dit voel vir hom asof hy in die duisternis wat om sy brein saampak, gaan weggly as hy enigeen van hulle sou los. Skok en uitputting hou hom teen die grond, hy asem die geur van die gras in en wag . . . wag dat iemand iets moet doen . . . dat iets moet gebeur . . . terwyl sy litteken die hele tyd dofweg op sy voorkop brand . . .

'n Vloed van klank verdoof en verwar hom, oral is stemme, voetstappe, krete . . . hy bly net waar hy is, sy gesig vertrek teen die geraas asof dit 'n nagmerrie is wat sal verbygaan . . .

Dan gryp 'n paar hande hom ruweg en draai hom om.

“Harry! Harry!”

Hy maak sy oë oop.

Hy kyk op na die sterbesaaide lug en Albus Dompeldorius hurk oor hom. Die donker skaduwees van 'n skare mense drom om hom saam, beweeg nader; Harry voel hoe die grond onder sy kop van die voetstappe vibreer.

Hy het na die kant van die doolhof teruggekom. Hy sien die stellasies bo hom, die vorms van mense wat daarop beweeg, die sterre daar bo.

Harry laat die Beker los, maar hy klou vir Cedric nog stywer vas. Hy lig sy vry hand en gryp Dompeldorius aan die gewrig terwyl Dompeldorius se gesig in en uit fokus swem.

“Hy’s terug,” fluister Harry. “Hy’s terug. Woldemort.”

“Wat gaan aan? Wat het gebeur?”

Cornelius Broddelwerk se gesig verskyn onderstebo bo Harry; dit lyk wit en geskok.

“Grote genade – Diggory!” fluister hy. “Dompeldorius – hy’s dood!”

Die woorde word herhaal, die skaduagtige figure wat om hulle saamdrom, hyg toe hulle dit vir diegene om hulle sê . . . en dan skree andere dit uit – skreeu dit die nag in – “Hy’s dood!” “Hy’s *dood!*” “Cedric Diggory! *Dood!*”

“Harry, los hom,” hoor hy Broddelwerk sê en hy voel vingers wat probeer om sy houvas op Cedric se slap liggaam te breek, maar Harry weier om hom te laat los.

Toe kom Dompeldorius se gesig wat nog steeds vaag en mistig is nader. “Harry, jy kan hom nie meer help nie. Dis verby. Laat los.”

“Hy wou hê dat ek hom moet terugbring,” prewel Harry – dit voel vir hom belangrik om dit te verduidelik. “Hy wou hê dat ek hom na sy ouers moet terugbring . . .”

“Dis reg, Harry . . . laat hom nou los . . .”

Dompeldorius buk af en met ongewone krag vir ’n man wat so oud en skraal is, lig hy Harry van die grond af op en sit hom op sy voete neer. Harry slinger. Sy kop pyn. Sy beseerde been kan sy gewig nie langer dra nie. Die mense om hom stamp en stoot om nader te kom, drom donker om hom saam – “Wat het gebeur?” “Wat makeer hom?” “*Diggory is dood!*”

“Hy moet na die siekeboeg gaan!” sê Broddelwerk hard. “Hy’s siek, hy’s beseer – Dompeldorius, Diggory se ouers, hulle’s hier, hulle’s op die stellasies . . .”

“Ek sal Harry neem, Dompeldorius, ek sal hom neem –”

“Nee, ek verkies om –”

“Dompeldorius, daar kom Amos Diggory aangehardloop . . . hy kom hierheen . . . dink jy nie jy moet vir hom sê – voor hy sien –?”

“Harry, bly hier –”

Meisies skree, snik histories . . . die toneel flikker vreemd voor Harry se oë . . .

“Dis alles reg, seun, ek het jou . . . komaan . . . die siekeboeg . . .”

“Dompeldorius het gesê bly,” sê Harry gesmoord, die geklop in sy litteken laat hom voel asof hy gaan naard word; alles lyk nog meer onduidelik as tevore.

“Jy moet gaan lê . . . kom nou . . .”

Iemand wat groter en sterker as Harry is, sleepdra hom deur die verskrikte skare; Harry hoor hoe hulle na asem snak, skreeu en gil toe die man wat hom ondersteun ’n pad deur hulle oopstoot en hom terug kasteel toe neem. Oor die grasperk, verby die meer en die Durmstrang-skip. Harry hoor niks behalwe die swaar asemhaling van die man wat hom help om te loop nie.

“Wat het gebeur, Harry?” vra die man uiteindelik toe hy Harry met die kliptrappe uithelp. *Klonk. Klonk. Klonk.* Dit is Maloog Moodie.

“Beker was ’n Poortsleutel,” sê Harry toe hulle deur die Ingangsportaal

hink. "Het my en Cedric na 'n begraafplaas geneem . . . en Woldemort was daar . . . Heer Woldemort . . ."

Klonk. Klonk. Klonk. Op met die marmertappe . . .

"Die Donker Heer was daar? Wat het toe gebeur?"

"Cedric vermoor . . . hulle het vir Cedric vermoor . . ."

"En toe?"

Klonk. Klonk. Klonk. Af in die gang . . .

"Het 'n towervloeistof gemaak . . . sy liggaam teruggekry . . ."

"Die Donker Heer het sy liggaam teruggekry? Hy is terug?"

"En die Doodseters het gekom . . . en toe het ons 'n tweegeveg gehad . . ."

"Jy het 'n tweegeveg met die Donker Heer gehad?"

"Het weggekom . . . my towerstaf . . . het iets snaaks gedoen . . . ek het my ma en pa gesien . . . hulle het uit sy towerstaf gekom . . ."

"Hier in, Harry . . . hier in en sit . . . jy sal nou-nou beter voel . . . drink dit . . ."

Harry hoor hoe 'n sleutel in 'n slot knars en voel hoe 'n koppie in sy hande gedruk word.

"Drink dit . . . jy sal beter voel . . . komaan, Harry, ek moet weet presies wat gebeur het . . ."

Moodie help Harry om die vloeistof in sy keel af te gooi; hy hoes en 'n pepersmaak brand sy keel. Moodie se kantoor kom helderder in fokus en so ook Moodie . . . hy lyk net so bleek soos Broddelwerk en albei sy oë staan sonder om te knip na Harry se gesig.

"Woldemort is terug, Harry? Is jy seker dat hy terug is? Hoe het hy dit gedoen?"

"Hy het goed uit sy pa se graf gevat en van Wurmstert en van my," sê Harry. Sy kop voel nou baie helder; sy litteken is nie meer so erg seer nie; hy kan Moodie se gesig nou duidelik sien, selfs al is die kantoor donker. Hy hoor nog steeds 'n geskree en krete wat van die Kwiddiekveld af kom.

"Wat het die Donker Heer by jou gevat?" sê Moodie.

"Bloed," sê Harry en lig sy arm. Sy mou is stukkend waar Wurmstert se dolk dit geskeur het.

Moodie blaas sy asem met 'n lang, lae sissgeluid uit. "En die Doodseters? Is hulle terug?"

"Ja," sê Harry. "Hope van hulle . . ."

"Hoe het hy hulle behandel?" vra Moodie bedaard. "Het hy hulle vergewe?"

Harry het egter so pas onthou. Hy moes vir Dompeldorius gesê het, hy moes hom net daar gesê het – "Daar's 'n Doodseter by Hogwarts! Daar's 'n Doodseter hier – hy het my naam in die Beker Vol Vuur gesit en seker gemaak dat ek tot aan die einde –"

Harry probeer opstaan, maar Moodie druk hom plat.

“Ek weet wie die Doodseter is,” sê hy kalm.

“Karkaroff?” sê Harry wildweg. “Waar is hy? Het u hom? Is hy toegesluit?”

“Karkaroff?” sê Moodie met ’n vreemde laggie. “Karkaroff het voet in die wind geslaan toe hy die Donker Merk op sy arm voel brand het. Hy het te veel getroue ondersteuners van die Donker Heer verraaï om hulle te wil ontmoet . . . maar ek twyfel of hy ver sal kom. Die Donker Heer het sy metodes om sy vyande op te spoor.”

“Karkaroff is weg? Hy het weggehardloop? Maar dan – dan was dit nie hy wat my naam in die Beker gesit het nie?”

“Nee,” sê Moodie stadig. “Nee, hy het nie. Dit was ek wat dit gedoen het.”

Harry hoor, maar glo dit nie.

“Nee, u het nie,” sê hy. “U het dit nie gedoen nie . . . dit kan nie wees nie . . .”

“Ek verseker jou dit was ek,” sê Moodie en sy magiese oog draai om en staar na die deur en Harry weet dat hy seker maak dat niemand daar buite staan nie. Terselfdertyd haal Moodie sy towerstaf uit en rig dit op Harry.

“Dan het hy hulle vergewe?” sê hy. “Die Doodseters wat vrygelaat is? Diegene wat nie Azkaban toe is nie?”

“Wat?” sê Harry.

Hy staar na die towerstaf wat Moodie op hom rig. Dit is ’n flou poging tot ’n grappie, dit moet net een wees.

“Ek het jou gevra,” sê Moodie stadig, “of hy die skuim wat nooit eens na hom gaan soek het nie vergewe het. Daardie verraderlike lafaards wat nie vir hom Azkaban toe wou gaan nie. Die trouelose, waardelose vullis wat dapper genoeg was om by die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker in maskers rond te trippel, maar op vlug slaan toe hulle die Donker Merk sien wat ek die lug in gestuur het.”

“U het die Donker . . . waarvan praat u?”

“Ek het jou gesê, Harry . . . ek het jou gesê. As daar een ding is wat ek meer as enigiets anders haat, dan is dit ’n Doodseter wat losgekom het. Hulle het hul rûe op my meester gedraai toe hy hulle die nodigste gehad het. Ek het verwag dat hy hulle sou straf. Ek het verwag dat hy hulle sou martel. Sê vir my dat hy hulle gefolter het, Harry . . .” Moodie se gesig word skielik deur ’n kranksinnige grynsag verlig. “Sê vir my dat hy vir hulle gesê het dat ek, slegs ek, getrou gebly het . . . bereid om alles te waag om die een ding wat hy die graagste wou hê aan hom uit te lewer . . . vir jou.”

“U het nie . . . dit – dit kan nie u . . .”

“Wie het jou naam onder ’n ander skool se naam in die Beker Vol Vuur gesit? Ek het. Wie het elke ander persoon wat ek gereken het jou mag

beseer of verhinder om die Toernooi te wen die skrik op die lyf gejaag? Ek het. Wie het Hagrid aangepor om vir jou die drake te wys? Ek het. Wie het jou gehelp om 'n manier te vind om die draak te klop? *Ek het.*"

Moodie se magiese oog het nou van die deur af weggedraai. Dit is op Harry gerig. Sy windskewe mond grynslag nou breër as ooit. "Dit was nie maklik, Harry, om jou deur die take te loods sonder om agterdog te verwek nie. Ek moes elke greintjie geslepenheid tot my beskikking inspan sodat my aandeel in jou sukses nie gemerk word nie. Dompeldorius sou snuf in die neus gekry het as jy alles te maklik reggekry het. Solank jy net in daardie doolhof kon kom, verkieslik met 'n voorsprong – dan, dit het ek geweet, sal ek van die ander kampioene ontslae kan raak sodat jou weg oop voor jou sal lê. Maar ek moes ook met jou onnoselheid rekening hou. Die tweede taak . . . dit was toe ek die bangste was dat ons sal misluk. Ek het 'n ogie oor jou gehou, Potter. Ek het geweet jy het nog nie die eierleidraad gesnap nie, dus moes ek jou nog 'n wenk gee –"

"Jy het nie," sê Harry skor. "Cedric het die leidraad vir my gegee."

"Wie het vir Cedric gesê om dit onder die water oop te maak? Ek het. Ek het aanvaar dat hy die inligting vir jou sal gee. Ordentlike mense is so maklik om te manipuleer, Potter. Ek was seker dat Cedric jou sal wil terugbetaal omdat jy hom van die drake vertel het, en hy het ook. Maar selfs toe, Potter, selfs toe het dit gelyk asof jy sou misluk. Ek het jou die hele tyd dopgehou . . . al daardie ure in die biblioteek. Het jy nie besef dat die boek wat jy nodig gehad het nog die hele tyd in jou slaapsaal is nie? Ek het dit tevore daar geplant, ek het dit vir die Loggerenberg-seun gegee, onthou jy? *Magiese Mediterreense Waterplante en Hul Eienskappe*. Dit sou vir jou alles gesê het wat jy oor Kieugras moet weet. Ek het verwag dat jy vir 'n ieder en 'n elk sal vra om jou te help. Loggerenberg sou dadelik vir jou gesê het. Maar jy het nie . . . jy het nie . . . jy het 'n trotse en onafhanklike streep wat alles kon geruïneer het.

"Wat moes ek dus doen? Vir jou die inligting vanuit 'n ander, onskuldige bron voer. Jy het by die Kersbal vir my gesê dat die huiself met die naam Dobbi vir jou 'n Kersgeskenk gegee het. Ek het die elf na die personeelkamer laat kom om 'n kleed te kom haal wat skoongemaak moet word. Ek het gesorg dat ek kliphard met professor McGonagall gesels oor die gyselaars en oor of Potter daaraan sal dink om Kieugras te gebruik. En jou klein elwefriendjie het reguit na Snerp se voorraadkas gehardloop en toe gou vir jou gaan soek . . ."

Moodie se towerstaf is nog steeds op Harry se hart gerig. Teen die muur agter sy skouer beweeg skaduagtige vorms in die Vyandglas rond. "Jy was so lank in daardie meer, Potter, dat ek gedink het jy het verdrink. Gelukkig het Dompeldorius jou onsinnige optrede vir edelheid aangesien en jou daarvoor hoog aangeskryf. Ek kon weer asemhaal.

"Jy het vannag in die doolhof natuurlik 'n baie makliker tydjie gehad

as wat eintlik die geval moet gewees het,” sê Moodie. “Dit is omdat ek dit gepatrolleer het – ek kan mos deur die heinings sien – en talle hindernisse vir jou uit die weg geruim het. Ek het vir Fleur Delacour Bedwelm toe sy verbygekom het. Ek het die Imperiusvloek op Krum gesit sodat hy met Diggory kon afreken en so jou pad na die Beker vir jou oopgemaak.”

Harry staar na Moodie. Hy kan nie verstaan hoe dit kan wees nie . . . Dompeldorius se vriend, die beroemde Auror . . . die een wat so baie Doodseters gevang het . . . dit maak nie sin nie . . . glad nie sin nie . . .

Die mistige vorms in die Vyandglas word skerper, duideliker. Harry kan die buitelyne van drie mense wat al nader kom oor Moodie se skouer sien. Moodie kyk egter nie na hulle nie. Sy magiese oog is op Harry gerig.

“Die Donker Heer het nie daarin geslaag om jou dood te maak nie, Potter en hy wil dit so graag doen,” fluister Moodie. “Dink net hoe hy my sal beloon as hy moet uitvind dat ek dit vir hom gedoen het. Ek het jou vir hom gegee – die ding wat hy bo alles nodig gehad het om weer te herstel – en toe het ek jou ook vir hom doodgemaak. Ek sal bo al die ander Doodseters vereer word. Ek sal sy grootste, beste ondersteuner wees . . . nader aan hom as ’n eie seun . . .”

Moodie se normale oog peul uit, die magiese oog is vasgenaël op Harry. Die deur is gesluit en Harry weet dat hy sy towerstaf nooit betyds sal kan uithaal nie . . .

“Ek en die Donker Heer,” sê Moodie en nou lyk hy heeltemal waansinnig daar waar hy grynsend oor Harry troon, “het baie gemeen. Albei van ons het teleurstellende vaders gehad . . . inderdaad uiters teleurstellend. Albei van ons het die onwaardigheid ervaar, Harry, dat ons na ons vaders vernoem is. En albei van ons het die plesier . . . die allergrootste plesier gehad . . . om ons vaders te vermoor om sodoende die volgehoue voortbestaan van die Donker Orde te verseker!”

“Jy is mal,” sê Harry – hy kan homself nie keer nie – “jy’s mal!”

“Dan is ek mal?” sê Moodie en sy stem styg onbeheers. “Ons sal sien! Ons sal sien wie mal is noudat die Donker Heer terug is met my langs hom! Hy is terug, Harry Potter, jy het hom nie oorwin nie – en nou – gaan ek jou oorwin!”

Moodie lig sy towerstaf en maak sy mond oop net toe Harry sy hand in sy kleed steek –

“Bedwelm!” Daar is ’n verblindende rooi ligstraal en met ’n oorverdowende gekraak en ’n gesplinter bars die deur van Moodie se kantoor oop –

Moodie word agtertoe oor die kantoor se vloer geslinger. Harry, wat steeds na die plek kyk waar Moodie se gesig netnou nog was, sien hoe Albus Dompeldorius, professor Snerp en professor McGonagall uit die Vyandglas na hom staar. Hy kyk om en sien dat die drie van hulle in die deur staan. Dompeldorius is voor en sy towerstaf is uitgestrek voor hom.

Op daardie oomblik verstaan Harry vir die eerste keer ten volle hoe-kom die mense sê dat Dompeldorius die enigste towenaar is vir wie Wol-
demort nog ooit bang was. Die uitdrukking op Dompeldorius se gesig toe
hy na die bewustelose vorm van Maloog Moodie kyk, is vreesliker as wat
Harry hom ooit sou kon indink. Daar is geen vriendelike glimlag op
Dompeldorius se gesig nie, geen vonkeling in die oë agter die bril nie.
Koue woede staan op elke lyn van die afgeleefde gesig geskryf; 'n gevoel
van mag straal uit Dompeldorius asof hy 'n brandende hitte afgee.

Hy kom die kantoor binne, sit 'n voet onder Moodie se bewustelose
liggaam en draai hom op sy rug sodat sy gesig gesien kan word. Snerp
volg hom en kyk na die Vyandglas waaruit sy eie gesig nog steeds na die
kamer staar.

Professor McGonagall gaan reguit na Harry toe.

"Kom saam met my, Potter," fluister sy. Die dun lyn van haar mond
vertrek asof sy op die punt is om te begin huil. "Kom saam . . . sieke-
boeg . . ."

"Nee," sê Dompeldorius skerp.

"Dompeldorius, hy moet – kyk na hom – hy't vannag genoeg beleef –"

"Hy gaan bly, Minerva, omdat hy moet verstaan," sê Dompeldorius
kortaf. "Begrip is die eerste tree op die pad na aanvaarding en net met
aanvaarding kan daar herstel wees. Hy moet weet wie hom vannag deur
hierdie beproewing gesit het, en hoekom."

"Moodie," sê Harry. Hy kan dit nog steeds nie glo nie. "Hoe kan dit
Moodie wil wees?"

"Dit is nie Alastor Moodie nie," sê Dompeldorius sag. "Jy het die ware
Alastor Moodie nog nooit ontmoet nie. Die ware Moodie sou jou nie van
my af weggeneem het na wat vannag gebeur het nie. Die oomblik toe hy
jou geneem het, het ek geweet – en hom gevolg."

Dompeldorius buig oor Moodie se slap vorm en steek sy hand in sy
kleed. Hy haal Moodie se heupfles uit asook 'n stel sleutels. Dan draai hy
na professor McGonagall en na Snerp.

"Severus, gaan haal asseblief vir my die sterkste Waarheidserum wat jy
het en gaan dan af na die kombuis en bring die huiself met die naam
Knipogies hierheen. Minerva, gaan asseblief na Hagrid se huis waar jy 'n
groot swart hond in die pampoensland sal sien sit. Neem die hond na my
kantoor en sê vir hom dat ek binnekort daar sal wees. Kom dan terug
hierheen."

Indien Snerp of McGonagall hierdie opdragte eienaardig vind, laat
hulle niks blyk nie. Albei van hulle draai onmiddellik om en stap uit die
kantoor. Dompeldorius gaan na die trommel met die sewe slotte, steek
die eerste sleutel in die slot en maak dit oop. Daar is 'n massa towerboe-
ke. Dompeldorius maak die trommel toe, steek die tweede sleutel in die
tweede slot en maak die trommel weer eens oop. Die towerboeke het ver-

dwyn en hierdie keer is daar 'n verskeidenheid gebreekte Kulklikkers, stukke perkament en veerpenne en iets wat soos 'n silwerkleurige onsigbaarheidsmantel lyk. Harry kyk verbaas toe terwyl Dompeldorius die derde, vierde, vyfde en sesde sleutels in hul slotte steek en die trommel oopmaak om elke keer iets anders daarin te vind. Dan steek hy die sewende sleutel in die slot en gooi die deksel oop en Harry uiter 'n verbaasde kreet.

Hy kyk af in 'n soort put, 'n ondergrondse vertrek. Onder op die vloer, sowat drie meter diep en skynbaar vas aan die slaap, lê die ware Maloog Moodie. Hy is maer en uitgeteer, sy houtbeen is weg, die oogkas waarin sy magiese oog moet wees, lyk leeg onder die ooglid en klossies van sy grys hare is weg. Harry staar verstom van die slapende Moodie in die trommel na die bewustelose Moodie wat op die kantoor se vloer lê.

Dompeldorius klim in die trommel, laat sak homself en land ligvoets op die vloer langs die slapende Moodie. Hy buk oor hom.

“Bedwelm – beheer deur die Imperiusvloek – baie swak,” sê hy. “Hulle het natuurlik nodig gehad om hom aan die lewe te hou. Harry, gooi die indringer se mantel af, Alastor is yskoud. Madame Pomfrey sal hom moet sien, maar dit lyk nie asof hy in onmiddellike gevaar is nie.”

Harry maak soos vir hom gesê is; Dompeldorius gooi Moodie met die mantel toe, vou dit om hom in en klouter dan weer uit die trommel. Toe tel hy die heupfles wat op die lessenaar staan op, skroef dit oop en keer dit om. 'n Dik, jellieagtige vloeistof loop op die kantoor se vloer uit.

“Polisouspaljas, Harry,” sê Dompeldorius. “Jy sien hoe eenvoudig dit is, en hoe briljant. Want Moodie drink *niks* behalwe uit sy heupfles nie, hy's bekend daarvoor. Die indringer moes die ware Moodie natuurlik byderhand hê om die Paljas op 'n voortdurende basis te kan maak. Kyk hier, sy hare . . .” Dompeldorius kyk af na die Moodie in die trommel. “Die indringer het dit die hele jaar lank afgeknip, sien jy hoe ongelyk dit is? Maar ek het 'n gevoel dat ons kastige Moodie, in die lig van vannag se opwinding, dalkies vergeet het om dit so gereeld as wat nodig is te drink . . . op die uur . . . elke uur . . . ons sal sien.”

Dompeldorius trek die stoel voor die lessenaar uit en gaan sit daarop, sy oë vasgenael op die bewustelose Moodie op die vloer. Harry staar ook na hom. Minute gaan in stilte verby . . .

Dan, voor Harry se oë, begin die gesig van die man op die vloer verander. Die littekens verdwyn, die vel word glad; die verminkte neus word heel en begin krimp. Die lang maanhaar van grysgrou hare trek in die kopvel terug en word strooikleurig. Skielik, met 'n harde *klonk*, val die houtbeen weg toe 'n normale been in sy plek uitgroei; die volgende oomblik wip die magiese oog uit die man se gesig toe 'n regte oog in die oogkas verskyn; dit rol oor die vloer terwyl dit voortgaan om rond te draai.

Harry sien 'n man voor hom lê, bleek van gelaatskleur, effens besproet en met 'n bos ligte hare. Hy weet wie dit is. Hy het hom in Dompeldorius se Peinssif gesien, het gekyk hoe hy deur die Dementors uit die hof gelei word terwyl hy mnr. Crouch probeer oortuig het dat hy onskuldig is . . . nou het hy egter plooië om die oë en lyk hy heelwat ouer . . .

Haastige voetstappe kan buite in die gang gehoor word. Snerp is terug met Knipogies op sy hakke. Professor McGonagall is reg agter hulle.

“Crouch!” sê Snerp toe hy in die deur tot stilstand kom. “Barty Crouch!”

“Grote genade,” sê professor McGonagall wat ook botstil gaan staan het en na die man op die vloer staar.

Knipogies loer om Snerp se bene. Sy is slordig en vuil. Haar mond val wyd oop en sy uiter 'n deurdringende kreet. “Meneer Barty, meneer Barty, wat maak jy hier?”

Sy gooi haarself vooroor op die jong man se borskas. “Julle't hom doodgemaak! Julle't hom doodgemaak! Julle het meester se seun doodgemaak!”

“Hy is bloot Bedwelm, Knipogies,” sê Dompeldorius. “Staan opsy, asseblief. Severus, het jy die towerdrankie?”

Snerp gee vir Dompeldorius 'n klein glasbotteltjie aan waarin 'n helder vloeistof is, die Veritaserum waarmee hy Harry in die klas gedreig het. Dompeldorius staan op, buk oor die man op die vloer en trek hom op sodat hy teen die muur sit, reg onder die Vyandglas van waar die weerkaatsings van Dompeldorius, Snerp en McGonagall nog steeds na hulle almal gluur. Knipogies bly gekniel, bewend, haar hande oor haar gesig. Dompeldorius dwing die man se mond oop en laat drie druppels daarin val. Dan rig hy sy towerstaf op die man se borskas en sê, “Ontwaak!”

Crouch se seun se ooglede gaan oop. Sy gesig is slap en sy blik is ongefokus. Dompeldorius kniel voor hom sodat hulle in mekaar se oë kyk.

“Kan jy my hoor?” vra Dompeldorius.

Die man se ooglede flikker.

“Ja,” mompel hy.

“Ek wil hê jy moet ons vertel,” sê Dompeldorius sag, “hoekom jy hier is. Hoe het jy uit Azkaban ontsnap?”

Crouch trek sy asem sidderend in en sê dan in 'n plat en uitdrukkinglose stem, “My moeder het my gered. Sy het geweet dat sy sterwend is. Sy het my vader oorreed om my te red as 'n laaste guns aan haar. Hy het haar liefgehad soos hy my nooit kon liefhê nie. Hy het ingestem. Hulle het my kom besoek. Hulle het vir my 'n skeut Polisouspaljas gegee om te drink. Daar was van my moeder se hare daarin. Sy het op haar beurt Polisouspaljas gedrink waarin een van my hare was. Ons het mekaar se voor-koms aangeneem.”

Knipogies skud haar kop bewend. “Moet niks meer sê nie, meneer Barty, niks meer nie, jy maak moeilikheit vir jou pa!”

Crouch trek sy asem egter weer diep in en gaan dan in dieselfde plat stem voort. “Die Dementors is blind. Hulle het aangevoel dat een gesonde en een sterwende persoon Azkaban binnegekom het. Hulle het aangevoel dat een gesonde en een sterwende persoon Azkaban verlaat. My vader het my uitgesmokkel, vermom soos my moeder, ingeval enige van die gevangenes ons deur hul deure dophou.

“My moeder is kort daarna in Azkaban oorlede. Sy het tot teen die einde aangehou om Polisouspaljas te drink. Sy is onder my naam begrawe en met my voorkoms. Almal het geglo dat sy ek was.”

Die man se ooglede flikker.

“En wat het jou vader met jou gedoen toe jy eers by die huis was?” vra Dompeldorius sag.

“Voorgegee dat my ma gesterf het. ’n Stil, privaat begrafnis. Die graf was leeg. Die huiself het my verpleeg tot ek weer gesond was. Toe moes ek versteek word. Ek moes beheer word. My vader het talle towerspreuke gebruik om my te onderwerp. Toe my krag teruggekom het, het ek net aan my meester gedink . . . hoe om terug in sy diens te kom.”

“Hoe het jou vader jou onderwerp?” vra Dompeldorius.

“Die Imperiusvloek,” sê Crouch. “Ek was onder my vader se beheer. Ek is gedwing om ’n onsigbaarheidsmantel dag en nag te dra. Ek was die hele tyd by die huiself. Sy was my oppasser en versorger. Sy was jammer vir my. Sy het my vader oorreed om my nou en dan te trakteer. Belonings vir goeie gedrag.”

“Meneer Barty, meneer Barty,” snik Knipogies deur haar hande. “Jy moenie vir hulle vertel nie, ons gaan almal moeilikheid kry . . .”

“Het iemand agtergekom dat jy nog lewe?” vra Dompeldorius sag. “Het iemand buiten jou vader en die huiself van jou geweet?”

“Ja,” sê Crouch en sy ooglede flikker weer eens. “’n Heks in my vader se kantoor. Bertha Jurgens. Sy het na die huis gekom met dokumente wat my vader moes teken. Hy was nie tuis nie. Knipogies het haar laat inkom en toe terug kombuis toe gegaan, na my toe. Bertha Jurgens het egter vir Knipogies met my hoor praat. Sy het kom ondersoek instel. Sy het genoeg gehoor om te raai wie onder die onsigbaarheidsmantel skuil. My vader het tuisgekom. Sy het hom trompop geloop. Hy het ’n baie kragtige Geheuetowerspreuk op haar gesit sodat sy alles vergeet het. Te kragtig. Hy’t gesê dat dit haar geheue permanent beskadig het.”

“Vir wat het sy in my meester se sake kom krap?” snik Knipogies. “Hoekom het sy ons nie uitgelos nie?”

“Vertel my van die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker,” sê Dompeldorius.

“Knipogies het my vader oorreed om dit te doen,” sê Crouch nog steeds in dieselfde eentonige stem. “Sy het maande aan hom gesit. Ek het die huis jare laas verlaat. Ek was rasend oor Kwiddiek. Laat hom gaan, het sy gesê. Hy sal sy onsigbaarheidsmantel aanhê. Hy kan kyk. Laat hom

'n slaggie vars lug inasem. Sy't gesê dis wat my moeder sou wou hê. Sy't vir my pa gesê dat my moeder gesterf het sodat ek vry kan wees. Sy het my nie gered vir 'n lewe as 'n gevangene nie. Op die ou end het hy ingestem.

“Dit was alles sorgvuldig beplan. My vader het my en Knipogies vroeg daardie dag na die boonste losie geneem. Knipogies moes sê dat sy vir my vader plek hou. Ek moes daar sit, onsigbaar. Sodra almal die losie verlaat het, kon ons uitkom. Dit sou lyk asof Knipogies alleen is. Niemand sou weet nie.

“Maar wat Knipogies nie geweet het nie, was dat ek al sterker begin word het. Ek het begin om my vader se Imperiusvloek te beveg. Daar was tye dat ek amper my ou self was. Daar was kort oomblikke dat ek amper buite sy beheer was. Dit het daar in die boonste losie gebeur. Dit was asof ek uit 'n diep slaap wakker geword het. Ek het myself buite in die openbaar in die middel van 'n wedstryd bevind en ek het 'n towerstaf uit die seun voor my se sak sien steek. Sedert Azkaban is ek nog nie weer toegelaat om 'n towerstaf te hê nie. Ek het dit gesteel. Knipogies het nie daarvan geweet nie. Knipogies is bang vir hoogtes. Sy het haar gesig toegehou.”

“Meneer Barty, jou stoute seun!” fluister Knipogies terwyl die tranedeur haar vingers drup.

“Jy het dus die towerstaf geneem,” sê Dompeldorius. “Wat het jy daarmee gemaak?”

“Ons is terug na die tent,” sê Crouch. “Toe het ons hulle gehoor. Ons het die Doodseters gehoor. Diegene wat nooit in Azkaban was nie. Diegene wat nie vir my meester gely het nie. Hulle het hul rûe op hom gedraai. Hulle was nie slawe soos ek nie. Hulle was vry om hom te gaan soek, maar hulle het nie. Hulle het net met die Moggels gekgeskeer. Die geluid van hul stemme het my wakker gemaak. My brein was helderder as wat dit in jare was. Ek was woedend. Ek het die towerstaf gehad. Ek wou hulle aanval omdat hulle ontrou was aan my meester. My vader het die tent verlaat, hy het die Moggels gaan bevry. Knipogies was bang toe sy my so kwaad sien lyk het. Sy het haar eie soort toorkuns gebruik om my aan haar vas te maak. Sy het my uit die tent gesleep die woud in, weg van die Doodseters af. Ek het haar probeer terughou. Ek wou teruggaan na die kampeerplek toe. Ek wou daardie Doodseters wys wat getrouheid aan die Donker Heer beteken en hulle straf vir hul troueloosheid. Ek het die gesteelde towerstaf gebruik om die Donker Merk in die lug te laat verskyn.

“Towenaars van die Ministerie het opgedaag. Hulle het Bedwelmingstowerspreuke die wêreld vol geskiet. Een van die towerspreuke het tussen die bome waar ek en Knipogies gestaan het, gekom. Die band tussen ons is verbreek. Ons is albei Bedwelms.

“Toe Knipogies gevind is, het my vader geweet dat ek daar iewers moet wees. Hy het in die bosse waar sy gekry is, gesoek tot hy my gevoel het. Hy het gewag tot die ander lede van die Ministerie die woud verlaat het. Hy het my weer onder die Imperiusvloek geplaas en my huis toe geneem. Hy het Knipogies ontslaan. Sy het hom in die steek gelaat. Sy het toege-
laat dat ek ’n towerstaf in die hande kry. Sy het my amper laat ontsnap.”

Knipogies uiter ’n wanhopige kreet.

“Nou was dit net ek en my vader alleen in die huis. En toe . . . toe . . .”
Crouch se kop rol op sy nek en ’n waansinnige grynslag sprei uit oor sy gesig. “Toe het my meester my kom haal.

“Hy het laat een nag by ons huis opgedaag, in die arms van sy dienskneg, Wurmstert. My meester het uitgevind dat ek nog lewe. Hy het Bertha Jurgens in Albanië gevang. Hy het haar gemartel. Sy het baie dinge vir hom vertel. Sy het hom van die Drietowenaarstoernooi gesê. Sy het vir hom gesê dat die ou Auror, Moodie, by Hogwarts gaan skoolhou. Hy het haar gemartel tot hy die Geheuetowerspreuk wat my vader op haar geplaas het, gebreek het. Sy het hom vertel dat ek uit Azkaban ontsnap het. Sy het vir hom gesê dat my vader my gevange hou om te keer dat ek my meester gaan soek. Op hierdie manier het my meester uitgevind dat ek nog sy troue dienskneg is – waarskynlik die getrouste van almal. My meester het ’n plan gemaak gebaseer op die inligting wat Bertha Jurgens vir hom gegee het. Hy het my nodig gehad. Een nag teen middernag was hy voor ons deur. My vader het die deur oopgemaak.”

Die glimlag op Crouch se gesig word nog breër asof hy die soetste oomblik van sy lewe onthou. Knipogies se verskrikte bruin oë kan deur haar vingers gesien word. Sy lyk te geskok om te kan praat.

“Dit was gou oor. My vader is deur my meester onder die Imperiusvloek geplaas. Nou was my vader die gevangene, die een wat beheer word. My meester het hom gedwing om soos gewoonlik werk toe te gaan, te maak asof niks verkeerd is nie. En ek is vrygelaat. Ek het wakker geword. Ek was weer myself, lewend soos ek nie in jare was nie.”

“En wat wou die Heer Woldemort hê moet jy doen?” vra Dompeldorius.

“Hy’t gevra of ek gereed is om alles vir hom te waag. Ek was gereed. Dit was my droom, my grootste ambisie, om hom te dien, om myself te bewys. Hy’t vir my gesê dat hy ’n getroue dienskneg by Hogwarts moet hê. ’n Dienskneg wat vir Harry Potter deur die Drietowenaarstoernooi sal loods sonder dat iemand dit agterkom. ’n Dienskneg wat ’n ogie oor Harry Potter sal hou. Wat sal seker maak dat hy die Drietowenaarsbeker verower. Wat die Beker in ’n Poortsleutel sal verander wat dan die eerste persoon wat daaraan raak, na my meester sal neem. Maar eers –”

“Moes jy vir Alastor Moodie hê,” sê Dompeldorius. Sy blou oë blits hoewel sy stem kalm bly.

“Wurmstert en ek het dit gedoen. Ons het die Polisouspaljas voor die tyd voorberei. Ons is na sy huis. Moodie het hom teengesit. Daar was ’n oproer. Ons het hom net betyds stil gemaak. Hom in ’n kompartement van sy eie magiese trommel ingedwing. ’n Paar van sy hare geneem en by die Paljas gevoeg. Ek het dit gedrink en Moodie se dubbelganger geword. Ek het sy been en sy oog gevat. Ek was reg vir Arthur Weasley toe hy daar opdaag om die Moggels wat die steurnis gehoor het reg te sien. Ek het die vullisdromme in die agterplaas laat rondbeweeg. Ek het vir Arthur Weasley gesê dat ek indringers in my agterplaas gehoor het wat die dromme geaktiveer het. Toe het ek Moodie se klere en sy Donker verklikkers ingepak, dit alles in die trommel saam met Moodie gesit en Hogwarts toe gegaan. Ek het hom lewend gehou, beheer deur die Imperiusvloek. Ek moes hom kon ondervra. Uitvind oor sy verlede, sy gewoontes leer ken sodat ek selfs vir Dompeldorius kon flous. Ek moes ook van sy hare hê om die Polisouspaljas mee te maak. Die ander bestanddele was maklik. Ek het die Boomslangvel uit die kerkers gesteel. Toe die meester van Towerdrankies my in sy kantoor betrap het, het ek gesê dat ek opdrag het om dit te deursoek.”

“En wat het van Wurmstert geword nadat julle Moodie aangeval het?” vra Dompeldorius.

“Wurmstert het teruggegaan na my vader se huis om my meester te versorg en my vader te bewaak.”

“Maar jou vader het ontsnap,” sê Dompeldorius.

“Ja. Net soos ek het hy die Imperiusvloek begin beveg. Daar was tye dat hy geweet het wat aan die gang is. My meester het besluit dat dit nie meer veilig is vir my vader om die huis te verlaat nie. Hy het hom gedwing om eerder briewe na die Ministerie te stuur. Hy het hom gedwing om te skryf en te sê dat hy siek is. Wurmstert het sy pligte egter nie nagekom nie. Hy was nie versigtig genoeg nie. My vader het ontsnap. My meester het vermoed dat hy op pad Hogwarts toe was. My vader wou vir Dompeldorius alles gaan vertel, alles erken. Hy was van plan om te erken dat hy my uit Azkaban gesmokkel het.

“My meester het my laat weet dat my vader ontsnap het. Hy het gesê dat ek hom tot elke prys moet keer. Dus het ek gewag en opgelet. Ek het die kaart wat ek by Harry Potter gekry het, gebruik. Die kaart wat amper alles geruineer het.”

“Kaart?” sê Dompeldorius vinnig. “Watter kaart is dit?”

“Potter se kaart van Hogwarts. Potter het my daarop gesien. Potter het een nag gesien hoe ek nog bestanddele vir die Polisouspaljas uit Snerp se kantoor steel. Hy het gedink dat ek my vader is, siende dat ons dieselfde naam het. Ek het die kaart daardie nag by Potter gevat. Ek het vir hom gesê dat my vader Donker towenaars haat. Potter het geglo dat my vader agter Snerp aan is.

“Ek het ’n week gewag voor my vader by Hogwarts opgedaag het. Uiteindelik het die kaart een aand gewys hoe my vader die terrein binnekom. Ek het my onsigbaarheidsmantel omgesit en hom tegemoet gegaan. Hy het aan die kant van die Woud rondgeloop. Toe het Potter en Krum opgedaag. Ek het gewag. Ek kon nie vir Potter beseer nie, my meester het hom nodig gehad. Potter het weggehardloop om vir Dompeldorius te gaan haal. Ek het vir Krum Bedwelm en my vader doodgemaak.”

“Neeeee!” kerm Knipogies. “Meneer Barty, meneer Barty, wat sê jy alles?”

“Jy het jou vader vermoor,” sê Dompeldorius in dieselfde sagte stem. “Wat het jy met die liggaam gemaak?”

“Dit die Woud in gedra. Dit met die onsigbaarheidsmantel toegegooi. Ek het die kaart by my gehad. Ek het gesien hoe Potter die kasteel binnehardloop. Hy het vir Snerp raakgeloop. Dompeldorius het by hulle aangesluit. Ek het gesien hoe Potter vir Dompeldorius uit die kasteel bring. Ek het uit die Woud gestap, teruggeloop op my spoor tot ek agter hulle was en hulle toe tegemoet gestap. Ek het vir Dompeldorius gesê dat Snerp vir my gesê het waarheen om te gaan.

“Dompeldorius het vir my gesê dat ek na my vader moet gaan soek. Ek het teruggegaan na waar my vader se liggaam was. Het die kaart dopgehou. Toe almal weg is, het ek my vader se liggaam Getransfigureer. Hy het ’n been geword . . . ek het dit in die pas omgespitte grond voor Hagrid se hut begrawe terwyl ek die onsigbaarheidsmantel aangehad het.”

Nou heers daar ’n volslae stilte, behalwe Knipogies se aanhoudende gesnik.

Toe sê Dompeldorius, “En vannag . . .”

“Ek het aangebied om die Drietowenaarstrofee voor aandete na die doolhof te neem,” fluister Barty Crouch. “Het dit in ’n Poortsleutel verander. My meester se plan het gewerk. Hy is weer magtig en ek sal ver bo die drome van enige towenaar deur hom vereer word.”

Weer verlig die waansinnige glimlaggie sy gelaatstrekke en sy kop knik op sy skouers terwyl Knipogies snikkend langs hom sit en kerm.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

Dumbledore stood up. He stared down at Barty Crouch for a moment with disgust on his face. Then he raised his wand once more and ropes flew out of it, ropes that twisted themselves around Barty Crouch, binding him tightly. He turned to Professor McGonagall.

“Minerva, could I ask you to stand guard here while I take Harry upstairs?”

“Of course,” said Professor McGonagall. She looked slightly nauseous, as though she had just watched someone being sick. However, when she drew out her wand and pointed it at Barty Crouch, her hand was quite steady.

“Severus” — Dumbledore turned to Snape — “please tell Madam Pomfrey to come down here; we need to get Alastor Moody into the hospital wing. Then go down into the grounds, find Cornelius Fudge, and bring him up to this office. He will undoubtedly want to question Crouch himself. Tell him I will be in the hospital wing in half an hour’s time if he needs me.”

Snape nodded silently and swept out of the room.

“Harry?” Dumbledore said gently.

Harry got up and swayed again; the pain in his leg, which he had not noticed all the time he had been listening to Crouch, now returned in full measure. He also realized that he was shaking. Dumbledore gripped his arm and helped him out into the dark corridor.

“I want you to come up to my office first, Harry,” he said quietly as they headed up the passageway. “Sirius is waiting for us there.”

Harry nodded. A kind of numbness and a sense of complete unreality were upon him, but he did not care; he was even glad of it. He didn’t want to have to think about anything that had happened since he had first touched the Triwizard Cup. He didn’t want to have to examine the memories, fresh and sharp as photographs, which kept flashing across his mind. Mad-Eye Moody, inside the trunk. Wormtail, slumped on the ground, cradling his stump of an arm. Voldemort, rising from the steaming cauldron. Cedric . . . dead . . . Cedric, asking to be returned to his parents. . . .

“Professor,” Harry mumbled, “where are Mr. and Mrs. Diggory?”

“They are with Professor Sprout,” said Dumbledore. His voice, which had been so calm throughout the interrogation of Barty Crouch, shook very slightly for the first time. “She was Head of Cedric’s

House, and knew him best.”

They had reached the stone gargoyle. Dumbledore gave the password, it sprang aside, and he and Harry went up the moving spiral staircase to the oak door. Dumbledore pushed it open. Sirius was standing there. His face was white and gaunt as it had been when he had escaped Azkaban. In one swift moment, he had crossed the room.

“Harry, are you all right? I knew it — I knew something like this — what happened?”

His hands shook as he helped Harry into a chair in front of the desk.

“What happened?” he asked more urgently.

Dumbledore began to tell Sirius everything Barty Crouch had said. Harry was only half listening. So tired every bone in his body was aching, he wanted nothing more than to sit here, undisturbed, for hours and hours, until he fell asleep and didn’t have to think or feel anymore.

There was a soft rush of wings. Fawkes the phoenix had left his perch, flown across the office, and landed on Harry’s knee.

“Lo, Fawkes,” said Harry quietly. He stroked the phoenix’s beautiful scarlet-and-gold plumage. Fawkes blinked peacefully up at him. There was something comforting about his warm weight.

Dumbledore stopped talking. He sat down opposite Harry, behind his desk. He was looking at Harry, who avoided his eyes. Dumbledore was going to question him. He was going to make Harry relive everything.

“I need to know what happened after you touched the Portkey in

the maze, Harry,” said Dumbledore.

“We can leave that till morning, can’t we, Dumbledore?” said Sirius harshly. He had put a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Let him have a sleep. Let him rest.”

Harry felt a rush of gratitude toward Sirius, but Dumbledore took no notice of Sirius’s words. He leaned forward toward Harry. Very unwillingly, Harry raised his head and looked into those blue eyes.

“If I thought I could help you,” Dumbledore said gently, “by putting you into an enchanted sleep and allowing you to postpone the moment when you would have to think about what has happened tonight, I would do it. But I know better. Numbing the pain for a while will make it worse when you finally feel it. You have shown bravery beyond anything I could have expected of you. I ask you to demonstrate your courage one more time. I ask you to tell us what happened.”

The phoenix let out one soft, quavering note. It shivered in the air, and Harry felt as though a drop of hot liquid had slipped down his throat into his stomach, warming him, and strengthening him.

He took a deep breath and began to tell them. As he spoke, visions of everything that had passed that night seemed to rise before his eyes; he saw the sparkling surface of the potion that had revived Voldemort; he saw the Death Eaters Apparating between the graves around them; he saw Cedric’s body, lying on the ground beside the cup.

Once or twice, Sirius made a noise as though about to say something, his hand still tight on Harry’s shoulder, but Dumbledore raised his hand to stop him, and Harry was glad of this, because it

was easier to keep going now he had started. It was even a relief; he felt almost as though something poisonous were being extracted from him. It was costing him every bit of determination he had to keep talking, yet he sensed that once he had finished, he would feel better.

When Harry told of Wormtail piercing his arm with the dagger, however, Sirius let out a vehement exclamation and Dumbledore stood up so quickly that Harry started. Dumbledore walked around the desk and told Harry to stretch out his arm. Harry showed them both the place where his robes were torn and the cut beneath them.

“He said my blood would make him stronger than if he’d used someone else’s,” Harry told Dumbledore. “He said the protection my — my mother left in me — he’d have it too. And he was right — he could touch me without hurting himself, he touched my face.”

For a fleeting instant, Harry thought he saw a gleam of something like triumph in Dumbledore’s eyes. But next second, Harry was sure he had imagined it, for when Dumbledore had returned to his seat behind the desk, he looked as old and weary as Harry had ever seen him.

“Very well,” he said, sitting down again. “Voldemort has overcome that particular barrier. Harry, continue, please.”

Harry went on; he explained how Voldemort had emerged from the cauldron, and told them all he could remember of Voldemort’s speech to the Death Eaters. Then he told how Voldemort had untied him, returned his wand to him, and prepared to duel.

But when he reached the part where the golden beam of light had connected his and Voldemort’s wands, he found his throat obstructed. He tried to keep talking, but the memories of what had come out of

Voldemort's wand were flooding into his mind. He could see Cedric emerging, see the old man, Bertha Jorkins . . . his father . . . his mother . . .

He was glad when Sirius broke the silence.

"The wands connected?" he said, looking from Harry to Dumbledore. "Why?"

Harry looked up at Dumbledore again, on whose face there was an arrested look.

"Priori Incantatem," he muttered.

His eyes gazed into Harry's and it was almost as though an invisible beam of understanding shot between them.

"The Reverse Spell effect?" said Sirius sharply.

"Exactly," said Dumbledore. "Harry's wand and Voldemort's wand share cores. Each of them contains a feather from the tail of the same phoenix. *This* phoenix, in fact," he added, and he pointed at the scarlet-and-gold bird, perching peacefully on Harry's knee.

"My wand's feather came from Fawkes?" Harry said, amazed.

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "Mr. Ollivander wrote to tell me you had bought the second wand, the moment you left his shop four years ago."

"So what happens when a wand meets its brother?" said Sirius.

"They will not work properly against each other," said Dumbledore. "If, however, the owners of the wands force the wands to do battle . . . a very rare effect will take place. One of the wands will force the other to regurgitate spells it has performed — in reverse. The most recent first . . . and then those which preceded it . . ."

He looked interrogatively at Harry, and Harry nodded.

“Which means,” said Dumbledore slowly, his eyes upon Harry’s face, “that some form of Cedric must have reappeared.”

Harry nodded again.

“Diggory came back to life?” said Sirius sharply.

“No spell can reawaken the dead,” said Dumbledore heavily. “All that would have happened is a kind of reverse echo. A shadow of the living Cedric would have emerged from the wand . . . am I correct, Harry?”

“He spoke to me,” Harry said. He was suddenly shaking again. “The . . . the ghost Cedric, or whatever he was, spoke.”

“An echo,” said Dumbledore, “which retained Cedric’s appearance and character. I am guessing other such forms appeared . . . less recent victims of Voldemort’s wand. . . .”

“An old man,” Harry said, his throat still constricted. “Bertha Jorkins. And . . .”

“Your parents?” said Dumbledore quietly.

“Yes,” said Harry.

Sirius’s grip on Harry’s shoulder was now so tight it was painful.

“The last murders the wand performed,” said Dumbledore, nodding. “In reverse order. More would have appeared, of course, had you maintained the connection. Very well, Harry, these echoes, these shadows . . . what did they do?”

Harry described how the figures that had emerged from the wand had prowled the edges of the golden web, how Voldemort had seemed to fear them, how the shadow of Harry’s father had told him what to do, how Cedric’s had made its final request.

At this point, Harry found he could not continue. He looked around at Sirius and saw that he had his face in his hands.

Harry suddenly became aware that Fawkes had left his knee. The phoenix had fluttered to the floor. It was resting its beautiful head against Harry's injured leg, and thick, pearly tears were falling from its eyes onto the wound left by the spider. The pain vanished. The skin mended. His leg was repaired.

"I will say it again," said Dumbledore as the phoenix rose into the air and resettled itself upon the perch beside the door. "You have shown bravery beyond anything I could have expected of you tonight, Harry. You have shown bravery equal to those who died fighting Voldemort at the height of his powers. You have shouldered a grown wizard's burden and found yourself equal to it — and you have now given us all that we have a right to expect. You will come with me to the hospital wing. I do not want you returning to the dormitory tonight. A Sleeping Potion, and some peace . . . Sirius, would you like to stay with him?"

Sirius nodded and stood up. He transformed back into the great black dog and walked with Harry and Dumbledore out of the office, accompanying them down a flight of stairs to the hospital wing.

When Dumbledore pushed open the door, Harry saw Mrs. Weasley, Bill, Ron, and Hermione grouped around a harassed-looking Madam Pomfrey. They appeared to be demanding to know where Harry was and what had happened to him. All of them whipped around as Harry, Dumbledore, and the black dog entered, and Mrs. Weasley let out a kind of muffled scream.

"Harry! Oh Harry!"

She started to hurry toward him, but Dumbledore moved between them.

“Molly,” he said, holding up a hand, “please listen to me for a moment. Harry has been through a terrible ordeal tonight. He has just had to relive it for me. What he needs now is sleep, and peace, and quiet. If he would like you all to stay with him,” he added, looking around at Ron, Hermione, and Bill too, “you may do so. But I do not want you questioning him until he is ready to answer, and certainly not this evening.”

Mrs. Weasley nodded. She was very white. She rounded on Ron, Hermione, and Bill as though they were being noisy, and hissed, “Did you hear? He needs quiet!”

“Headmaster,” said Madam Pomfrey, staring at the great black dog that was Sirius, “may I ask what — ?”

“This dog will be remaining with Harry for a while,” said Dumbledore simply. “I assure you, he is extremely well trained. Harry — I will wait while you get into bed.”

Harry felt an inexpressible sense of gratitude to Dumbledore for asking the others not to question him. It wasn't as though he didn't want them there; but the thought of explaining it all over again, the idea of reliving it one more time, was more than he could stand.

“I will be back to see you as soon as I have met with Fudge, Harry,” said Dumbledore. “I would like you to remain here tomorrow until I have spoken to the school.” He left.

As Madam Pomfrey led Harry to a nearby bed, he caught sight of the real Moody lying motionless in a bed at the far end of the room. His wooden leg and magical eye were lying on the bedside table.

“Is he okay?” Harry asked.

“He’ll be fine,” said Madam Pomfrey, giving Harry some pajamas and pulling screens around him. He took off his robes, pulled on the pajamas, and got into bed. Ron, Hermione, Bill, Mrs. Weasley, and the black dog came around the screen and settled themselves in chairs on either side of him. Ron and Hermione were looking at him almost cautiously, as though scared of him.

“I’m all right,” he told them. “Just tired.”

Mrs. Weasley’s eyes filled with tears as she smoothed his bedcovers unnecessarily.

Madam Pomfrey, who had bustled off to her office, returned holding a small bottle of some purple potion and a goblet.

“You’ll need to drink all of this, Harry,” she said. “It’s a potion for dreamless sleep.”

Harry took the goblet and drank a few mouthfuls. He felt himself becoming drowsy at once. Everything around him became hazy; the lamps around the hospital wing seemed to be winking at him in a friendly way through the screen around his bed; his body felt as though it was sinking deeper into the warmth of the feather mattress. Before he could finish the potion, before he could say another word, his exhaustion had carried him off to sleep.

Harry woke up, so warm, so very sleepy, that he didn’t open his eyes, wanting to drop off again. The room was still dimly lit; he was sure it was still nighttime and had a feeling that he couldn’t have been asleep very long.

Then he heard whispering around him.

“They’ll wake him if they don’t shut up!”

“What are they shouting about? Nothing else can have happened, can it?”

Harry opened his eyes blearily. Someone had removed his glasses. He could see the fuzzy outlines of Mrs. Weasley and Bill close by. Mrs. Weasley was on her feet.

“That’s Fudge’s voice,” she whispered. “And that’s Minerva McGonagall’s, isn’t it? But what are they arguing about?”

Now Harry could hear them too: people shouting and running toward the hospital wing.

“Regrettable, but all the same, Minerva —” Cornelius Fudge was saying loudly.

“You should never have brought it inside the castle!” yelled Professor McGonagall. “When Dumbledore finds out —”

Harry heard the hospital doors burst open. Unnoticed by any of the people around his bed, all of whom were staring at the door as Bill pulled back the screens, Harry sat up and put his glasses back on.

Fudge came striding up the ward. Professors McGonagall and Snape were at his heels.

“Where’s Dumbledore?” Fudge demanded of Mrs. Weasley.

“He’s not here,” said Mrs. Weasley angrily. “This is a hospital wing, Minister, don’t you think you’d do better to —”

But the door opened, and Dumbledore came sweeping up the ward.

“What has happened?” said Dumbledore sharply, looking from Fudge to Professor McGonagall. “Why are you disturbing these people? Minerva, I’m surprised at you — I asked you to stand guard

over Barty Crouch —”

“There is no need to stand guard over him anymore, Dumbledore!” she shrieked. “The Minister has seen to that!”

Harry had never seen Professor McGonagall lose control like this. There were angry blotches of color in her cheeks, and her hands were balled into fists; she was trembling with fury.

“When we told Mr. Fudge that we had caught the Death Eater responsible for tonight’s events,” said Snape, in a low voice, “he seemed to feel his personal safety was in question. He insisted on summoning a dementor to accompany him into the castle. He brought it up to the office where Barty Crouch —”

“I told him you would not agree, Dumbledore!” Professor McGonagall fumed. “I told him you would never allow dementors to set foot inside the castle, but —”

“My dear woman!” roared Fudge, who likewise looked angrier than Harry had ever seen him, “as Minister of Magic, it is my decision whether I wish to bring protection with me when interviewing a possibly dangerous —”

But Professor McGonagall’s voice drowned Fudge’s.

“The moment that — that thing entered the room,” she screamed, pointing at Fudge, trembling all over, “it swooped down on Crouch and — and —”

Harry felt a chill in his stomach as Professor McGonagall struggled to find words to describe what had happened. He did not need her to finish her sentence. He knew what the dementor must have done. It had administered its fatal Kiss to Barty Crouch. It had sucked his soul out through his mouth. He was worse than dead.

“By all accounts, he is no loss!” blustered Fudge. “It seems he has been responsible for several deaths!”

“But he cannot now give testimony, Cornelius,” said Dumbledore. He was staring hard at Fudge, as though seeing him plainly for the first time. “He cannot give evidence about why he killed those people.”

“Why he killed them? Well, that’s no mystery, is it?” blustered Fudge. “He was a raving lunatic! From what Minerva and Severus have told me, he seems to have thought he was doing it all on You-Know-Who’s instructions!”

“Lord Voldemort *was* giving him instructions, Cornelius,” Dumbledore said. “Those people’s deaths were mere by-products of a plan to restore Voldemort to full strength again. The plan succeeded. Voldemort has been restored to his body.”

Fudge looked as though someone had just swung a heavy weight into his face. Dazed and blinking, he stared back at Dumbledore as if he couldn’t quite believe what he had just heard. He began to sputter, still goggling at Dumbledore.

“You-Know-Who . . . returned? Preposterous. Come now, Dumbledore . . .”

“As Minerva and Severus have doubtless told you,” said Dumbledore, “we heard Barty Crouch confess. Under the influence of Veritaserum, he told us how he was smuggled out of Azkaban, and how Voldemort — learning of his continued existence from Bertha Jorkins — went to free him from his father and used him to capture Harry. The plan worked, I tell you. Crouch has helped Voldemort to return.”

“See here, Dumbledore,” said Fudge, and Harry was astonished to see a slight smile dawning on his face, “you — you can’t seriously believe that. You-Know-Who — back? Come now, come now . . . certainly, Crouch may have *believed* himself to be acting upon You-Know-Who’s orders — but to take the word of a lunatic like that, Dumbledore . . .”

“When Harry touched the Triwizard Cup tonight, he was transported straight to Voldemort,” said Dumbledore steadily. “He witnessed Lord Voldemort’s rebirth. I will explain it all to you if you will step up to my office.”

Dumbledore glanced around at Harry and saw that he was awake, but shook his head and said, “I am afraid I cannot permit you to question Harry tonight.”

Fudge’s curious smile lingered. He too glanced at Harry, then looked back at Dumbledore, and said, “You are — er — prepared to take Harry’s word on this, are you, Dumbledore?”

There was a moment’s silence, which was broken by Sirius growling. His hackles were raised, and he was baring his teeth at Fudge.

“Certainly, I believe Harry,” said Dumbledore. His eyes were blazing now. “I heard Crouch’s confession, and I heard Harry’s account of what happened after he touched the Triwizard Cup; the two stories make sense, they explain everything that has happened since Bertha Jorkins disappeared last summer.”

Fudge still had that strange smile on his face. Once again, he glanced at Harry before answering.

“You are prepared to believe that Lord Voldemort has returned, on

the word of a lunatic murderer, and a boy who . . . well . . .”

Fudge shot Harry another look, and Harry suddenly understood.

“You’ve been reading Rita Skeeter, Mr. Fudge,” he said quietly.

Ron, Hermione, Mrs. Weasley, and Bill all jumped. None of them had realized that Harry was awake.

Fudge reddened slightly, but a defiant and obstinate look came over his face.

“And if I have?” he said, looking at Dumbledore. “If I have discovered that you’ve been keeping certain facts about the boy very quiet? A Parselmouth, eh? And having funny turns all over the place —”

“I assume that you are referring to the pains Harry has been experiencing in his scar?” said Dumbledore coolly.

“You admit that he has been having these pains, then?” said Fudge quickly. “Headaches? Nightmares? Possibly — hallucinations?”

“Listen to me, Cornelius,” said Dumbledore, taking a step toward Fudge, and once again, he seemed to radiate that indefinable sense of power that Harry had felt after Dumbledore had Stunned young Crouch. “Harry is as sane as you or I. That scar upon his forehead has not addled his brains. I believe it hurts him when Lord Voldemort is close by, or feeling particularly murderous.”

Fudge had taken half a step back from Dumbledore, but he looked no less stubborn.

“You’ll forgive me, Dumbledore, but I’ve never heard of a curse scar acting as an alarm bell before. . . .”

“Look, I saw Voldemort come back!” Harry shouted. He tried to get out of bed again, but Mrs. Weasley forced him back. “I saw the

Death Eaters! I can give you their names! Lucius Malfoy —”

Snape made a sudden movement, but as Harry looked at him, Snape’s eyes flew back to Fudge.

“Malfoy was cleared!” said Fudge, visibly affronted. “A very old family — donations to excellent causes —”

“Macnair!” Harry continued.

“Also cleared! Now working for the Ministry!”

“Avery — Nott — Crabbe — Goyle —”

“You are merely repeating the names of those who were acquitted of being Death Eaters thirteen years ago!” said Fudge angrily. “You could have found those names in old reports of the trials! For heaven’s sake, Dumbledore — the boy was full of some crackpot story at the end of last year too — his tales are getting taller, and you’re still swallowing them — the boy can talk to snakes, Dumbledore, and you still think he’s trustworthy?”

“You fool!” Professor McGonagall cried. “Cedric Diggory! Mr. Crouch! These deaths were not the random work of a lunatic!”

“I see no evidence to the contrary!” shouted Fudge, now matching her anger, his face purpling. “It seems to me that you are all determined to start a panic that will destabilize everything we have worked for these last thirteen years!”

Harry couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He had always thought of Fudge as a kindly figure, a little blustering, a little pompous, but essentially good-natured. But now a short, angry wizard stood before him, refusing, point-blank, to accept the prospect of disruption in his comfortable and ordered world — to believe that Voldemort could have risen.

“Voldemort has returned,” Dumbledore repeated. “If you accept that fact straightaway, Fudge, and take the necessary measures, we may still be able to save the situation. The first and most essential step is to remove Azkaban from the control of the dementors —”

“Preposterous!” shouted Fudge again. “Remove the dementors? I’d be kicked out of office for suggesting it! Half of us only feel safe in our beds at night because we know the dementors are standing guard at Azkaban!”

“The rest of us sleep less soundly in our beds, Cornelius, knowing that you have put Lord Voldemort’s most dangerous supporters in the care of creatures who will join him the instant he asks them!” said Dumbledore. “They will not remain loyal to you, Fudge! Voldemort can offer them much more scope for their powers and their pleasures than you can! With the dementors behind him, and his old supporters returned to him, you will be hard-pressed to stop him regaining the sort of power he had thirteen years ago!”

Fudge was opening and closing his mouth as though no words could express his outrage.

“The second step you must take — and at once,” Dumbledore pressed on, “is to send envoys to the giants.”

“Envoys to the giants?” Fudge shrieked, finding his tongue again. “What madness is this?”

“Extend them the hand of friendship, now, before it is too late,” said Dumbledore, “or Voldemort will persuade them, as he did before, that he alone among wizards will give them their rights and their freedom!”

“You — you cannot be serious!” Fudge gasped, shaking his head

and retreating further from Dumbledore. “If the magical community got wind that I had approached the giants — people hate them, Dumbledore — end of my career —”

“You are blinded,” said Dumbledore, his voice rising now, the aura of power around him palpable, his eyes blazing once more, “by the love of the office you hold, Cornelius! You place too much importance, and you always have done, on the so-called purity of blood! You fail to recognize that it matters not what someone is born, but what they grow to be! Your dementor has just destroyed the last remaining member of a pure-blood family as old as any — and see what that man chose to make of his life! I tell you now — take the steps I have suggested, and you will be remembered, in office or out, as one of the bravest and greatest Ministers of Magic we have ever known. Fail to act — and history will remember you as the man who stepped aside and allowed Voldemort a second chance to destroy the world we have tried to rebuild!”

“Insane,” whispered Fudge, still backing away. “Mad . . .”

And then there was silence. Madam Pomfrey was standing frozen at the foot of Harry’s bed, her hands over her mouth. Mrs. Weasley was still standing over Harry, her hand on his shoulder to prevent him from rising. Bill, Ron, and Hermione were staring at Fudge.

“If your determination to shut your eyes will carry you as far as this, Cornelius,” said Dumbledore, “we have reached a parting of the ways. You must act as you see fit. And I — I shall act as I see fit.”

Dumbledore’s voice carried no hint of a threat; it sounded like a mere statement, but Fudge bristled as though Dumbledore were advancing upon him with a wand.

“Now, see here, Dumbledore,” he said, waving a threatening finger. “I’ve given you free rein, always. I’ve had a lot of respect for you. I might not have agreed with some of your decisions, but I’ve kept quiet. There aren’t many who’d have let you hire werewolves, or keep Hagrid, or decide what to teach your students without reference to the Ministry. But if you’re going to work against me —”

“The only one against whom I intend to work,” said Dumbledore, “is Lord Voldemort. If you are against him, then we remain, Cornelius, on the same side.”

It seemed Fudge could think of no answer to this. He rocked backward and forward on his small feet for a moment and spun his bowler hat in his hands. Finally, he said, with a hint of a plea in his voice, “He can’t be back, Dumbledore, he just can’t be . . .”

Snape strode forward, past Dumbledore, pulling up the left sleeve of his robes as he went. He stuck out his forearm and showed it to Fudge, who recoiled.

“There,” said Snape harshly. “There. The Dark Mark. It is not as clear as it was an hour or so ago, when it burned black, but you can still see it. Every Death Eater had the sign burned into him by the Dark Lord. It was a means of distinguishing one another, and his means of summoning us to him. When he touched the Mark of any Death Eater, we were to Disapparate, and Apparate, instantly, at his side. This Mark has been growing clearer all year. Karkaroff’s too. Why do you think Karkaroff fled tonight? We both felt the Mark burn. We both knew he had returned. Karkaroff fears the Dark Lord’s vengeance. He betrayed too many of his fellow Death Eaters to be sure of a welcome back into the fold.”

Fudge stepped back from Snape too. He was shaking his head. He did not seem to have taken in a word Snape had said. He stared, apparently repelled by the ugly mark on Snape's arm, then looked up at Dumbledore and whispered, "I don't know what you and your staff are playing at, Dumbledore, but I have heard enough. I have no more to add. I will be in touch with you tomorrow, Dumbledore, to discuss the running of this school. I must return to the Ministry."

He had almost reached the door when he paused. He turned around, strode back down the dormitory, and stopped at Harry's bed.

"Your winnings," he said shortly, taking a large bag of gold out of his pocket and dropping it onto Harry's bedside table. "One thousand Galleons. There should have been a presentation ceremony, but under the circumstances . . ."

He crammed his bowler hat onto his head and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him. The moment he had disappeared, Dumbledore turned to look at the group around Harry's bed.

"There is work to be done," he said. "Molly . . . am I right in thinking that I can count on you and Arthur?"

"Of course you can," said Mrs. Weasley. She was white to the lips, but she looked resolute. "We know what Fudge is. It's Arthur's fondness for Muggles that has held him back at the Ministry all these years. Fudge thinks he lacks proper Wizarding pride."

"Then I need to send a message to Arthur," said Dumbledore. "All those that we can persuade of the truth must be notified immediately, and he is well placed to contact those at the Ministry who are not as shortsighted as Cornelius."

“I’ll go to Dad,” said Bill, standing up. “I’ll go now.”

“Excellent,” said Dumbledore. “Tell him what has happened. Tell him I will be in direct contact with him shortly. He will need to be discreet, however. If Fudge thinks I am interfering at the Ministry —”

“Leave it to me,” said Bill.

He clapped a hand on Harry’s shoulder, kissed his mother on the cheek, pulled on his cloak, and strode quickly from the room.

“Minerva,” said Dumbledore, turning to Professor McGonagall, “I want to see Hagrid in my office as soon as possible. Also — if she will consent to come — Madame Maxime.”

Professor McGonagall nodded and left without a word.

“Poppy,” Dumbledore said to Madam Pomfrey, “would you be very kind and go down to Professor Moody’s office, where I think you will find a house-elf called Winky in considerable distress? Do what you can for her, and take her back to the kitchens. I think Dobby will look after her for us.”

“Very — very well,” said Madam Pomfrey, looking startled, and she too left.

Dumbledore made sure that the door was closed, and that Madam Pomfrey’s footsteps had died away, before he spoke again.

“And now,” he said, “it is time for two of our number to recognize each other for what they are. Sirius . . . if you could resume your usual form.”

The great black dog looked up at Dumbledore, then, in an instant, turned back into a man.

Mrs. Weasley screamed and leapt back from the bed.

“Sirius Black!” she shrieked, pointing at him.

“Mum, shut up!” Ron yelled. “It’s okay!”

Snape had not yelled or jumped backward, but the look on his face was one of mingled fury and horror.

“Him!” he snarled, staring at Sirius, whose face showed equal dislike. “What is he doing here?”

“He is here at my invitation,” said Dumbledore, looking between them, “as are you, Severus. I trust you both. It is time for you to lay aside your old differences and trust each other.”

Harry thought Dumbledore was asking for a near miracle. Sirius and Snape were eyeing each other with the utmost loathing.

“I will settle, in the short term,” said Dumbledore, with a bite of impatience in his voice, “for a lack of open hostility. You will shake hands. You are on the same side now. Time is short, and unless the few of us who know the truth stand united, there is no hope for any of us.”

Very slowly — but still glaring at each other as though each wished the other nothing but ill — Sirius and Snape moved toward each other and shook hands. They let go extremely quickly.

“That will do to be going on with,” said Dumbledore, stepping between them once more. “Now I have work for each of you. Fudge’s attitude, though not unexpected, changes everything. Sirius, I need you to set off at once. You are to alert Remus Lupin, Arabella Figg, Mundungus Fletcher — the old crowd. Lie low at Lupin’s for a while; I will contact you there.”

“But —” said Harry.

He wanted Sirius to stay. He did not want to have to say good-bye again so quickly.

“You’ll see me very soon, Harry,” said Sirius, turning to him. “I promise you. But I must do what I can, you understand, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Yeah . . . of course I do.”

Sirius grasped his hand briefly, nodded to Dumbledore, transformed again into the black dog, and ran the length of the room to the door, whose handle he turned with a paw. Then he was gone.

“Severus,” said Dumbledore, turning to Snape, “you know what I must ask you to do. If you are ready . . . if you are prepared . . .”

“I am,” said Snape.

He looked slightly paler than usual, and his cold, black eyes glittered strangely.

“Then good luck,” said Dumbledore, and he watched, with a trace of apprehension on his face, as Snape swept wordlessly after Sirius.

It was several minutes before Dumbledore spoke again.

“I must go downstairs,” he said finally. “I must see the Diggorys. Harry — take the rest of your potion. I will see all of you later.”

Harry slumped back against his pillows as Dumbledore disappeared. Hermione, Ron, and Mrs. Weasley were all looking at him. None of them spoke for a very long time.

“You’ve got to take the rest of your potion, Harry,” Mrs. Weasley said at last. Her hand nudged the sack of gold on his bedside cabinet as she reached for the bottle and the goblet. “You have a good long sleep. Try and think about something else for a while . . . think about what you’re going to buy with your winnings!”

“I don’t want that gold,” said Harry in an expressionless voice. “You have it. Anyone can have it. I shouldn’t have won it. It should’ve been Cedric’s.”

The thing against which he had been fighting on and off ever since he had come out of the maze was threatening to overpower him. He could feel a burning, prickling feeling in the inner corners of his eyes. He blinked and stared up at the ceiling.

“It wasn’t your fault, Harry,” Mrs. Weasley whispered.

“I told him to take the Cup with me,” said Harry.

Now the burning feeling was in his throat too. He wished Ron would look away.

Mrs. Weasley set the potion down on the bedside cabinet, bent down, and put her arms around Harry. He had no memory of ever being hugged like this, as though by a mother. The full weight of everything he had seen that night seemed to fall in upon him as Mrs. Weasley held him to her. His mother’s face, his father’s voice, the sight of Cedric, dead on the ground all started spinning in his head until he could hardly bear it, until he was screwing up his face against the howl of misery fighting to get out of him.

There was a loud slamming noise, and Mrs. Weasley and Harry broke apart. Hermione was standing by the window. She was holding something tight in her hand.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

“Your potion, Harry,” said Mrs. Weasley quickly, wiping her eyes on the back of her hand.

Harry drank it in one gulp. The effect was instantaneous. Heavy, irresistible waves of dreamless sleep broke over him; he fell back onto his pillows and thought no more.

Die Skeiding van die Weë

Dompeldorius staan op. Vir 'n oomblik staar hy af na Barty met minagting op sy gesig. Dan lig hy sy towerstaf en toue vlieg daaruit, toue wat hulself om Barty Crouch wikkel en hom styf vasbind.

Hy draai na professor McGonagall. “Minerva, kan ek jou vra om hier wag te hou terwyl ek vir Harry boontoe neem?”

“Natuurlik,” sê professor McGonagall. Sy lyk ietwat naar op die maag asof sy so pas moes kyk hoe iemand opgooi. Maar toe sy haar towerstaf uithaal en op Barty Crouch rig, bewe haar hand hoegenaamd niks.

“Severus,” Dompeldorius draai na Snerp, “sê asseblief vir Madame Pomfrey om hierheen te kom. Ons moet vir Alastor Moodie in die siekeboeg kry. Gaan dan na die terrein, soek vir Cornelius Broddelwerk en bring hom na hierdie kantoor. Hy sal ongetwyfeld self vir Crouch wil ondervra. Sê vir hom dat ek oor 'n halfuur in die siekeboeg sal wees indien hy my nodig het.”

Snerp knik en suis sonder 'n woord uit die vertrek.

“Harry?” sê Dompeldorius sag.

Harry staan op en steier opnuut; die pyn in sy been, waarvan hy skoon vergeet het die hele tyd dat hy na Crouch geluister het, is nou weer in volle sterkte terug. Hy besef ook dat hy erg bewe. Dompeldorius neem sy arm en help hom na die donker gang daar buite.

“Ek wil hê dat jy eers saam met my na my kantoor gaan, Harry,” sê hy sag terwyl hulle in die gang af stap. “Sirius wag daar vir ons.”

Harry knik. 'n Soort lamheid en 'n gevoel van totale onwerklikheid hang oor hom, maar hy gee nie om nie; hy is selfs bly daaroor. Hy wil aan niks dink wat gebeur het sedert hy die eerste keer aan die Drietowenaars-trofee geraak het nie. Hy wil nie die herinnerings wat skerp en vars soos foto's deur sy brein flits, ondersoek nie. Maloog Moodie, binne-in die trommel. Wurmstert, inmekaar op die grond met sy stompie in sy hand. Woldemort wat uit die stomende hekseketel verrys. Cedric . . . dood . . . Cedric wat vra dat hy hom na sy ouers toe moet terugneem . . .

“Professor,” prewel Harry, “waar is mnr. en mev. Diggor?”

“Hulle is by professor Spruit,” sê Dompeldorius. Sy stem, wat so be-

daard tydens die onderhoud met Barty Crouch was, bewe nou vir die eerste keer effens. “Sy was die hoof van Cedric se huis en het hom die beste geken.”

Hulle het die klipdrakekop bereik. Dompeldorius gee die wagwoord en dit spring opsy. Hy en Harry gaan met die bewegende wenteltrap op na die eikehoutdeur. Dompeldorius stoot dit oop.

Sirius staan daar. Sy gesig is wit en vervalle net soos toe hy uit Azkaban ontsnap het. Hy kruis die vertrek met een vinnige beweging. “Harry, is jy oukei? Ek het dit geweet – ek het geweet dat iets soos dit – wat het gebeur?”

Sy hande skud toe hy Harry in ’n stoel voor die lessenaar help.

“Wat het gebeur?” vra hy met nog meer dringendheid.

Dompeldorius begin om vir Sirius alles te vertel wat Barty Crouch gesê het. Harry luister net met ’n halwe oor. Hy is so moeg dat elke been in sy liggaam pyn, hy wil niks anders doen as om ongehinderd hier te sit nie, vir ure en ure, tot hy aan die slaap raak en niks hoef te dink of te voel nie.

Daar is ’n sagte ruising van vlerke. Fawkes die feniks het van sy dwarsstok af oor die kantoor gevlieg en op Harry se knie geland.

“Hallo, Fawkes,” sê Harry sag. Hy streel die feniks se pragtige skarlatenrooi en goue vere. Fawkes knipoog rustig vir hom. Daar is iets vertroostends aan sy warm gewig.

Dompeldorius het ophou praat. Hy gaan sit oorkant Harry agter sy lessenaar. Hy kyk na Harry wat sy oë vermy. Dompeldorius gaan hom uitvra. Hy gaan maak dat Harry alles weer beleef.

“Ek moet weet wat met jou gebeur het nadat jy daar in die doolhof aan die Poortsleutel geraak het, Harry,” sê Dompeldorius.

“Ons kan darem seker tot môreoggend toe wag, of hoe, Dompeldorius?” sê Sirius skor. Hy sit ’n hand op Harry se skouer. “Laat hom slaap. Gee hom ’n ruskans.”

Harry voel ’n opwelling van dankbaarheid teenoor Sirius, maar Dompeldorius slaan nie ag op Sirius se woorde nie. Hy leun oor na Harry. Harry lig sy kop onwillig en kyk in sy blou oë.

“As ek van mening was dat dit jou sal help,” sê Dompeldorius bedaard, “om jou in ’n betowerde slaap te laat verval wat die oomblik sal uitstel wanneer jy oor alles wat vannag gebeur het, moet dink, dan sou ek dit gedoen het. Maar ek weet van beter. As ons die pyn vir ’n rukkie verdoof, sal dit net erger wees wanneer dit uiteindelik terugkom. Jy was dapper, ver bo my verwagtinge. Ek vra dat jy jou moed nog een keer demonstreer. Ek vra dat jy vir ons vertel wat gebeur het.”

Die feniks uiter ’n sagte, trillende noot. Dit sidder in die lug en dit voel vir Harry asof ’n druppel warm vloeistof wat hom warm maak en krag gee deur sy keel tot in sy maag glip.

Hy trek sy asem diep in en begin vertel. Soos hy praat, verrys visioene van alles wat daardie nag gebeur het voor sy oë. Hy sien die blink oppervlak van die towervloeistof wat vir Woldemort lewe gegee het; hy sien hoe die Doodseters tussen die grafte om hulle Appareer; hy sien Cedric se liggaam waar dit op die grond langs die Beker lê.

Sirius maak 'n paar keer 'n geluid deur sy neus asof hy op die punt is om iets te sê, sy hand nog steeds ferm op Harry se skouer, maar Dompeldorius lig 'n hand om hom te keer en Harry is bly hieroor, want noudat hy eers begin het, is dit makliker om voort te gaan. Dit is selfs 'n verligting; dit voel amper asof iets giftigs uit hom getrek word; dit verg elke greintjie vasberadenheid om aan te hou praat, maar hy vermoed dat hy beter sal voel wanneer hy eers klaar is.

Toe Harry vertel hoe Wurmstert sy arm met die dolk geprik het, uiter Sirius 'n driftige kreet en Dompeldorius staan so vinnig op dat Harry wip van die skrik. Dompeldorius loop om die lessenaar en sê vir Harry om sy arm uit te steek. Harry wys vir hulle albei die plek waar sy kleed geskeur is en die sny daaronder.

“Hy het gesê dat my bloed hom sterker sal maak as wanneer hy iemand anders s'n gebruik,” sê Harry vir Dompeldorius. “Hy't gesê dat hy dan ook die beskerming wat my – my ma vir my gegee het – sal hê. En hy was reg – hy kon aan my raak sonder dat iets met hom gebeur het, hy't aan my gesig gevat.”

Vir 'n vlietende oomblik verbeel Harry hom dat hy 'n glinstering van iets soos triomf in Dompeldorius se oë sien. Die volgende oomblik is Harry egter seker dat dit sy verbeelding was, want toe Dompeldorius terugstap na sy stoel, lyk hy ouer en moeër as wat Harry hom nog ooit sien lyk het.

“Goed dan,” sê hy toe hy weer gaan sit. “Woldemort het daardie spesifieke hindernis oorkom. Harry, gaan voort, asseblief.”

Harry gaan voort. Hy vertel hoe Woldemort uit die hekseketel verrys het asook alles wat hy kan onthou van Woldemort se toespraak aan die Doodseters. Toe vertel hy hoe Woldemort hom losgemaak, sy towerstaf vir hom teruggegee en met die tweegeveg begin het.

Toe hy egter by die gedeelte kom waar die goue ligstraal sy en Woldemort se towerstawwe verbind het, is daar 'n knop in sy keel. Hy probeer verder praat, maar die herinnering aan wat uit Woldemort se towerstaf gekom het, gaan soos 'n vloedgolf deur sy brein. Hy sien hoe Cedric verskyn, sien die ou man, Bertha Jurgens . . . sy pa . . . sy ma . . .

Hy is verlig toe Sirius die stilte verbreek.

“Die towerstawwe was verbind?” vra hy terwyl hy van Harry na Dompeldorius kyk. “Hoekom?”

Harry kyk weer op na Dompeldorius op wie se gesig 'n aandagtige uitdrukking is.

“Priori Incantatem,” prewel hy.

Sy oë boor in Harry s’n en dis amper asof ’n onsigbare ligstraal van begrip tussen hulle bestaan.

“Die towerspreuk-omkeringseffek?” sê Sirius skerp.

“Presies,” sê Dompeldorius. “Harry se towerstaf en Woldemort s’n deel ’n kern. Elkeen van hulle bevat ’n veer uit die stert van dieselfde feniks. Hierdie feniks, om die waarheid te sê,” voeg hy by en wys na die skarlatenrooi en goue voël wat rustig op Harry se knie sit.

“My towerstaf se veer kom van Fawkes af?” sê Harry verbaas.

“Ja,” sê Dompeldorius. “Mnr. Ollivander het aan my geskryf om te sê dat jy die tweede towerstaf gekoop het, die oomblik toe jy sy winkel vier jaar gelede verlaat het.”

“Wat gebeur wanneer ’n towerstaf sy broer ontmoet?” vra Sirius.

“Hulle werk nie behoorlik teen mekaar nie,” sê Dompeldorius. “Indien die eenaars van die towerstawwe hul egter tot ’n tweegeveg dwing . . . gebeur iets wat baie raar is.

“Een van die towerstawwe sal die ander een dwing om al die spreuke wat dit uitgevoer het, terug te bring – in omgekeerde volgorde. Die mees onlangse een eerste . . . en dan dié wat daarop gevolg het . . .”

Hy kyk vraend na Harry en Harry knik.

“Wat beteken,” sê Dompeldorius stadig, sy oë op Harry se gesig, “dat die een of ander vorm van Cedric weer moet verskyn het.”

Harry knik weer.

“Diggory het lewend geword?” vra Sirius skerp.

“Geen towerspreuk kan die dooies terugbring nie,” sê Dompeldorius swaar. “Al wat kan gebeur, is ’n soort omkeringseggo. ’n Skaduwee van die lewende Cedric sou uit die towerstaf gekom het . . . is ek reg, Harry?”

“Hy het met my gepraat,” sê Harry. Skielik bewy hy weer. “Die . . . die spook Cedric, of wat ook al, het gepraat.”

“n Eggo,” sê Dompeldorius, “wat Cedric se voorkoms en geaardheid behou. Ek sou raai dat ander sodanige vorms ook verskyn het . . . minder onlangse slagoffers van Woldemort se towerstaf . . .”

“n Ou man,” sê Harry wie se keel nog steeds getrek is. “Bertha Jurgens. En . . .”

“Jou ouers?” sê Dompeldorius sag.

“Ja,” sê Harry.

Sirius se greep op Harry se skouer is nou so stewig dat dit seermaak.

“Die laaste moorde wat die towerstaf gepleeg het,” sê Dompeldorius kopknikkend, “in omgekeerde volgorde. Meer sou natuurlik verskyn het indien jy die verbintenis behou het. Goed, Harry, daardie eggo’s, daardie skaduwees . . . wat het hulle gedoen?”

Harry beskryf hoe die figure wat uit die towerstaf verskyn het om die kant van die goue web gesluip het, hoe dit gelyk het asof Woldemort

bang is vir hulle, hoe die skaduwee van Harry se pa vir hom gesê het wat hy moet doen, hoe Cedric sy laaste versoek uitgespreek het.

Op hierdie punt kan Harry nie verder praat nie. Hy kyk om na Sirius en sien dat hy sy gesig in sy hande vashou.

Harry kom skielik agter dat Fawkes nie meer op sy knie is nie. Die feniks het vloer toe gefladder. Hy rus nou sy pragtige kop teen Harry se beseerde been en dik, pêrelagtige trane val uit sy oë op die wond wat deur die spinnekop gemaak is. Die pyn verdwyn. Die vel groei toe. Sy been is gesond.

“Ek herhaal,” sê Dompeldorius toe die feniks opstyg en op die dwarsstok langs die deur gaan sit. “Jy was vannag dapperder as wat ek ooit van jou kon verwag het, Harry. Jou moed staan gelyk aan die moed van diegene wat gesterf het in die stryd teen Woldemort toe hy op sy magtigste was. Jy het die las van ’n volwasse towenaar met sukses gedra – en jy het nou vir ons alles gegee wat ons met reg van jou kan verwag. Jy sal saam met my na die siekeboeg gaan. Ek wil nie hê dat jy vannag terug slaapsaal toe gaan nie. ’n Slaapdrankie en vrede . . . Sirius, sal jy by hom wil bly?”

Sirius knik en staan op. Hy transformeer terug in die groot swart hond en stap saam met Harry en Dompeldorius by die kantoor uit en af met ’n stel trappe na die siekeboeg.

Toe Dompeldorius die deur oopstoot, sien Harry hoe mev. Weasley, Bill, Ron en Hermien om Madame Pomfrey saamdrom, wat omgekras lyk. Dit lyk asof hulle van haar wil weet waar Harry is en wat met hom gebeur het.

Almal van hulle vlieg om toe Harry, Dompeldorius en die swart hond inkom en mev. Weasley uiter ’n gesmoorde kreet. “Harry! O, Harry!”

Sy is op die punt om hom storm te loop, maar Dompeldorius beweeg tussen hulle in.

“Molly,” sê hy terwyl hy ’n hand in die lug hou, “luister asseblief vir ’n oomblik na my. Harry is vannag deur ’n gruwelike beproewing. Hy het alles so pas herleef toe hy dit vir my vertel het. Wat hy nou nodig het, is slaap, rus en vrede. As hy wil hê dat julle almal by hom moet bly,” voeg hy by terwyl hy na Ron, Hermien en Bill kyk, “dan mag julle. Maar ek wil nie hê dat enigiemand hom moet uitvra tensy hy gereed is om te antwoord nie, en beslis nie vanaand nie.”

Mev. Weasley knik. Sy is baie bleek.

Sy vlieg vir Ron, Hermien en Bill in asof hulle besig is om ’n geraas te maak en sis, “Het julle gehoor? Hy het stilte nodig!”

“Meneer die skoolhoof,” sê Madame Pomfrey en staar na die groot swart hond wat Sirius is, “mag ek vra wat –?”

“Hierdie hond sal ’n rukkie by Harry bly,” sê Dompeldorius bedaard. “Ek verseker u dat hy uiters goed geleer is. Harry – ek sal wag terwyl jy in die bed klim.”

Harry is ontsettend verlig dat Dompeldorius die ander mense versoek het om hom nie uit te vra nie. Dis nie asof hy hulle nie daar wil hê nie, dis net dat die gedagte dat hy alles weer van voor af moet verduidelik, van voor af moet beleef, meer is as wat hy kan verduur.

“Ek sal terugkom om jou te sien sodra ek met Broddelwerk klaar is, Harry,” sê Dompeldorius. “Ek wil hê dat jy môre hier bly tot ek met die res van die skool gepraat het.” Hy gaan uit.

Toe Madame Pomfrey Harry na ’n nabygeleë bed neem, sien hy die regte Moodie bewegingloos op ’n bed in die verste hoek van die vertrek lê. Sy houtbeen en sy magiese oog lê op sy bedkassie.

“Is hy oukei?” vra Harry.

“Hy sal wees,” sê Madame Pomfrey toe sy vir Harry pajamas aangee en die gordyne om sy bed toetrek. Hy trek sy kleed uit, pluk die pajamas aan en klim in die bed. Ron, Hermien, Bill, mev. Weasley en die swart hond kom om die skerm en gaan sit in stoele aan weerskante van hom. Ron en Hermien kyk behoedsaam na hom asof hulle vir hom bang is.

“Ek’s oukei,” sê hy vir hulle. “Net moeg.”

Mev. Weasley se oë skiet vol tranes en sy trek sy beddegoed heeltemal onnodig reg.

Madame Pomfrey, wat haastig na haar kantoor geloop het, kom terug met ’n beker en ’n klein botteltjie waarin ’n bietjie pers vloeistof is.

“Jy moet alles drink, Harry,” sê sy. “Dis ’n towerdrankie vir ’n droomlose slaap.”

Harry neem die beker en vat ’n paar slukke. Hy voel onmiddellik hoe hy slaperig word. Alles om hom word wasig; dit lyk asof die lampe in die siekeboeg vriendelik deur die skerm om sy bed vir hom knipoog; dit voel asof sy liggaam al dieper in die warmte van die veermatras wegsink. Voor die towerdrankie op is, voor hy ’n verdere woord kan sê, haal die moegheid hom in en val hy aan die slaap.

Toe Harry wakker word, is hy so warm en slaperig dat hy nie sy oë oopmaak nie en net weer wil wegraak. Die kamer is nog steeds dofweg verlig; hy is seker dat dit nog nag is en het ’n gevoel dat hy nie baie lank kon geslaap het nie.

Dan hoor hy ’n fluistering langs hom.

“Hulle sal hom wakker maak as hulle nie hul monde hou nie!”

“Waaroor skreeu hulle so? Niks anders kon darem seker gebeur het nie, hè?”

Harry maak sy oë slaperig oop. Iemand het sy bril afgehaal. Hy kan die wasige buitelyne van Bill en mev. Weasley langs hom sien. Mev. Weasley het opgestaan.

“Dis Broddelwerk se stem,” fluister sy. “En dis Minerva McGonagall s’n, nè? Maar waarom stry hulle?”

Nou kan Harry hulle ook hoor: mense wat skree en na die siekeboeg hardloop.

“’n Jammerte, maar nietemin, Minerva –” sê Cornelius Broddelwerk hard.

“Jy moes dit nooit na die kasteel gebring het nie!” gil professor McGonagall. “As Dompeldorius moet uitvind –”

Harry hoor hoe die siekeboeg se deur oopbars. Hy kom orent en sit sy bril op sonder dat enige van die mense om sy bed dit agterkom. Hulle staar almal na die deur terwyl Bill die gordyne wegtrek.

Broddelwerk kom die slaapsaal binnegestap. Professors McGonagall en Snerp is op sy hakke.

“Waar is Dompeldorius?” wil Broddelwerk van mev. Weasley weet.

“Hy’s nie hier nie,” sê mev. Weasley vererg. “Dit is ’n siekeboeg, minister, dink jy nie dat jy eerder –”

Dan gaan die deur oop en Dompeldorius suis die saal binne.

“Wat gaan aan?” vra Dompeldorius kortaf terwyl hy van Broddelwerk na professor McGonagall kyk. “Hoekom steur julle hierdie mense? Minerva, ek is geskok – ek het gevra dat jy oor Barty Crouch wag hou –”

“Dis nie meer nodig om oor hom wag te hou nie, Dompeldorius!” gil sy. “Daarvoor het die minister gesorg!”

Harry het professor McGonagall nog nooit só beheer sien verloor nie. Daar is ergerlike vlekke op haar wange, haar hande is in vuiste gebal en sy bewe van woede.

“Toe ons vir mnr. Broddelwerk vertel dat ons die Doodseter wat vir vannag se gebeure verantwoordelik was, gevang het,” sê Snerp in ’n lae stem, “het hy blykbaar gevoel dat sy persoonlike veiligheid op die spel is. Hy het daarop aangedring om ’n Dementor in te roep om saam met hom na die kasteel te kom. Hy het dit na die kantoor waar Barty Crouch is, geneem en –”

“Ek het vir hom gesê dat jy daarteen sal wees, Dompeldorius!” gil professor McGonagall. “Ek het vir hom gesê dat jy nooit sal toelaat dat ’n Dementor sy voete in hierdie kasteel sit nie, maar –”

“My liewe dame!” brul Broddelwerk wat ook nou kwater lyk as wat Harry hom nog ooit sien lyk het. “As Minister vir Towerkuns is dit my besluit of ek beskerming nodig het wanneer ek ’n potensieel gevaarlike –”

Broddelwerk se stem word egter deur professor McGonagall s’n verswelg.

“Die oomblik toe daardie – daardie ding die kamer binnegekom het,” skreeu sy terwyl sy na Broddelwerk wys en van kop tot tone bewe, “het dit op Crouch afgepyl en – en –”

Harry voel hoe sy maag koud word terwyl professor McGonagall sukkel om woorde te vind om te beskryf wat gebeur het. Dis nie vir hom nodig dat sy die sin voltooi nie. Hy weet wat die Dementor gedoen het. Dit

het vir Barty Crouch die doodskus gegee. Dit het sy siel deur sy mond uitgesuig. Hy is erger as dood.

“Volgens wat almal sê, is dit geen verlies nie!” tier Broddelwerk. “Dit lyk asof hy vir verskeie moorde verantwoordelik was!”

“Maar nou kan hy nie getuienis lewer nie, Cornelius,” sê Dompeldorius. Hy staar stip na Broddelwerk asof hy hom vir die eerste keer duidelik sien. “Hy kan nie getuienis lewer oor die redes waarom hy daardie mense vermoor het nie.”

“Waarom hy hulle vermoor het? Wel, dis geen geheim nie, is dit?” tier Broddelwerk. “Hy was heeltemal waansinnig! Te oordeel na wat Minerva en Severus vir my gesê het, blyk dit dat hy reken dat hy sy opdragte van Jy-Weet-Wie af gekry het!”

“Die Heer Woldemort het vir hom opdragte gegee, Cornelius,” sê Dompeldorius. “Daardie mense se sterftes was blote byprodukte van ’n plan om Woldemort weer tot sy volle krag te herstel. Die plan het geslaag. Woldemort het weer ’n liggaam.”

Broddelwerk lyk asof iemand hom so pas met ’n swaar gewig teen die kop geslaan het. Hy lyk duiselig en hy knipper sy oë en staar na Dompeldorius asof hy sy ore nie kan glo nie.

Dan begin hy stotter terwyl hy nog steeds na Dompeldorius staar. “Jy-Weet-Wie . . . is terug? Belaglik. Komaan, Dompeldorius . . .”

“Soos Minerva en Severus ongetwyfeld vir jou vertel het,” sê Dompeldorius, “het ons gehoor hoe Barty Crouch dit erken. Onder die invloed van Veritaserum het hy vir ons vertel hoe hy uit Azkaban gesmokkel is en hoe Woldemort – wat by Bertha Jurgens gehoor het dat hy nog lewe – hom van sy vader bevry het en hom gebruik het om vir Harry te vang. Die plan het gewerk, ek sê dit vir jou. Crouch het Woldemort gehelp om terug te keer.”

“Kyk hier, Dompeldorius,” sê Broddelwerk en Harry sien tot sy verbasing ’n klein glimlaggie op sy gesig, “jy – jy kan dit darem seker nie regtig wil glo nie. Jy-Weet-Wie – terug? Toe nou, toe nou . . . ek gee toe dat Crouch kon geglo het dat hy Jy-Weet-Wie se opdragte uitvoer – maar om darem die woord van ’n malmens soos daardie te aanvaar, Dompeldorius . . .”

“Toe Harry vannag aan die Drietowenaarstrofee geraak het, is hy reguit na Woldemort geneem,” sê Dompeldorius besadig. “Hy was ’n ooggetuie van die Heer Woldemort se hergeboorte. Ek sal alles verduidelik as jy saam met my na my kantoor sal kom.”

Dompeldorius kyk om na Harry en sien dat hy wakker is, maar hy skud sy kop en sê, “Ek is bevrees ons kan nie toelaat dat jy vannag vir Harry ondervra nie.”

Broddelwerk se vreemde glimlaggie bly huiwer.

Hy kyk ook na Harry, dan kyk hy terug na Dompeldorius en sê, “Jy is – h’m – bereid om Harry se woord hieroor te aanvaar, hè, Dompeldorius?”

Daar is 'n oomblik se stilte wat deur Sirius se gegrom verbreek word. Sy nekhare staan orent en hy wys vir Broddelwerk tande.

“Natuurlik glo ek vir Harry,” sê Dompeldorius. Nou blits sy oë. “Ek het Crouch se bekentenis gehoor en so ook Harry se weergawe van wat gebeur het nadat hy aan die Drietowenaarstroeë geraak het. Die twee stories maak sin, hulle verklaar alles wat gebeur het sedert Bertha Jurgens verlede somer verdwyn het.”

Daardie snaakse glimlaggie rus nog steeds op Broddelwerk se gesig. Weer kyk hy na Harry voor hy antwoord. “Jy is bereid om te glo dat die Heer Woldemort terug is op sterkte van die woord van 'n waansinnige moordenaar en 'n seun wat . . . wel . . .”

Broddelwerk kyk weer vlugtig na Harry en skielik verstaan Harry.

“U het Rika Skinner gelees, mnr. Broddelwerk,” sê hy sag.

Ron, Hermien, mev. Weasley en Bill wip almal van die skrik. Nie een van hulle het besef dat Harry wakker is nie.

Broddelwerk word effens rooi, maar 'n uitdagende en koppige trek beweeg oor sy gesig.

“En as ek het?” sê hy terwyl hy na Dompeldorius kyk. “As ek ontdek het dat jy sekere feite oor die seun geheim gehou het? 'n Parselmond, h'm? En 'n snaakse flouvalleer die wêreld vol –”

“Ek vermoed dat jy na die pyne verwys wat Harry soms in sy litteken kry?” sê Dompeldorius koel.

“Dan erken jy dat hy daardie pyne kry?” sê Broddelwerk vinnig. “Hoofpyne? Nagmerries? Moontlik – hallusinasies?”

“Luister hier, Cornelius,” sê Dompeldorius en hy gee 'n tree na Broddelwerk toe, en weer is dit asof daardie geweldige, onverklaarbare mag wat Harry gevoel het nadat Dompeldorius die jong Crouch Bedwelw het, uit hom straal. “Harry is net so by sy volle verstand soos jy of ek. Daardie litteken op sy voorkop het nie sy brein aangetas nie. Ek verstaan dat dit seer is wanneer die Heer Woldemort naby is, of wanneer hy besonder moorddadig voel.”

Broddelwerk het 'n halwe tree van Dompeldorius af teruggeval, maar hy lyk niks minder koppig nie. “Jy moet my verskoon, Dompeldorius, maar ek het al tevore gehoor van 'n vloeklitteken wat as 'n waarskuwing dien . . .”

“Kyk, ek het vir Woldemort sien terugkom!” skree Harry. Hy probeer weer om uit die bed te klim, maar mev. Weasley dwing hom terug. “Ek het die Doodseters gesien! Ek kan vir julle hul name gee! Lucius Malfoy –”

Snerp maak 'n skielike beweging, maar toe Harry na hom kyk, vlieg Snerp se oë terug na Broddelwerk toe.

“Malfoy is vrygespreek!” sê Broddelwerk en hy lyk sigbaar beledig. “'n Baie ou familie – donasies vir goeie werke –”

“McNair!” gaan Harry voort.

“Ook vrygespreek! Werk nou vir die Ministerie!”

“Avery – Nott – Krabbe – Goliat –”

“Jy herhaal bloot die name van diegene wat dertien jaar gelede onskuldig bevind is op die aanklag dat hulle Doodseters is!” sê Broddelwerk vererg. “Jy kon daardie name in ou verslae oor die verhore gekry het! Genadetjie tog, Dompeldorius – die seun was verlede jaar net so behep met die een of ander onsinnige relaas – sy stories word al hoe meer verregaande en jy sluk hulle nog steeds – die seun kan met slange praat, Dompeldorius, en jy dink sowaar dat hy betroubaar is?”

“Jou gek!” roep professor McGonagall uit. “Cedric Diggory! Mnr. Crouch! Daardie sterftes was nie die werk van ’n lukraak malmens nie!”

“Ek sien geen getuienis wat die teendeel bewys nie!” skree Broddelwerk wat nou net so kwaad soos sy is. Sy gesig word pers. “Dit lyk vir my asof julle almal vasberade is om paniek te saai wat alles waaraan ek die afgelope dertien jaar gewerk het, sal verongeluk!”

Harry kan nie glo wat hy hoor nie. Hy het Broddelwerk nog altyd as ’n goeie persoon gesien, ’n bietjie grootpraterig, ’n bietjie vol van homself, maar in wese goedaardig. Nou staan daar ’n kort, verwoede towenaar voor hom wat botweg weier om die vooruitsig van ontwrigting in sy gemaklike en geordende wêreldjie te aanvaar – wat weier om te glo dat Woldemort weer verrys het.

“Woldemort is terug,” herhaal Dompeldorius. “As jy hierdie feit onmiddellik kan aanvaar, Broddelwerk, en die nodige stappe neem, kan ons die situasie dalk red. Die eerste en belangrikste stap is om die beheer van Azkaban uit die hande van die Dementors te neem –”

“Verregaande!” skree Broddelwerk weer. “Die Dementors verwyder? Ek sal uit my werk geskop word as ek dit sou voorstel! Die helfte van ons voel snags veilig in ons beddens omdat ons weet dat die Dementors oor Azkaban wag hou!”

“Die res van ons slaap minder gerus, Cornelius, in die wete dat jy die Heer Woldemort se gevaarlikste ondersteuners onder die beheer geplaas het van wesens wat by hom sal aansluit die oomblik dat hy hulle vra!” sê Dompeldorius. “Hulle sal nie lojaal teenoor jou bly nie, Broddelwerk! Woldemort kan hulle veel meer ruimte bied vir die beoefening van hul magte en hul vreugdes as wat jy kan! Met die Dementors agter hom en sy ou ondersteuners langs hom sal jy sukkel om hom te keer om die soort mag wat hy dertien jaar gelede gehad het, terug te wen!”

Broddelwerk maak sy mond oop en toe asof geen woorde uitdrukking aan sy woede kan gee nie.

“Die tweede stap wat jy moet neem – en dadelik,” gaan Dompeldorius voort, “is om afgevaardigdes na die reuse te stuur.”

“Afgevaardigdes na die reuse?” gil Broddelwerk toe hy sy tong weer vind. “Watter malligheid is dit?”

“Steek die hand van vriendskap na hulle toe uit, nou, voor dit te laat is,” sê Dompeldorius, “anders sal Woldemort hulle oorreed, soos hy tevore gedoen het, dat hy die enigste towenaar is wat vir hulle regte en vryheid sal gee!”

“Jy – jy kan nie ernstig wees nie!” sê Broddelwerk en hy snak na asem terwyl hy sy kop skud en nog verder van Dompeldorius af wegstaan. “As die towergemeenskap moet uitvind dat ek die reuse genader het – mense haat hulle, Dompeldorius – einde van my loopbaan –”

“Jy is verblind,” sê Dompeldorius en nou word sy stem al hoër en die aura van mag om hom tasbaar; sy oë blits opnuut, “deur liefde vir jou pos, Cornelius! Jy plaas te veel klem, en jy het dit nog altyd gedoen, op die sogenaamde suiwerheid van bloed! Jy weier om in te sien dat dit nie belangrik is as wat iemand gebore is nie, maar wel wat hulle word! Jou Dementor het so pas die laaste oorblywende lid van ’n volbloedfamilie wat so oud soos enige ander is, verwoes – en kyk wat het daardie man gekies om met sy lewe te doen! Ek sê jou nou – neem die stappe wat ek voorstel en jy sal onthou word, binne jou pos of daarbuite, as een van die dapperste en grootste Ministers vir Towerkuns wat ons nog ooit gehad het. Weier om op te tree – en jy sal in die geskiedenis opgeteken staan as die man wat opsy gestaan het en Woldemort ’n tweede kans gegee het om die wêreld wat ons probeer herbou het, te verwoes!”

“Kranksinnig,” fluister Broddelwerk wat nog steeds agteruit tree. “Mal . . .”

Hierna heers daar ’n stilte. Madame Pomfrey staan versteen aan die voet van Harry se bed met haar hande oor haar mond. Mev. Weasley staan nog steeds by Harry met haar hand op sy skouer om te keer dat hy opstaan. Bill, Ron en Hermien staar na Broddelwerk.

“As jou vasberadenheid om jou oë te sluit jou so ver sal voer, Cornelius,” sê Dompeldorius, “dan het ons die einde van die pad bereik. Jy moet maak soos jy goeddink. En ek – ek sal maak soos ek goeddink.”

Daar is nie ’n sweem van ’n dreigement in Dompeldorius se stem nie; dit klink soos ’n blote stelling, maar Broddelwerk ruk hom op asof Dompeldorius met ’n towerstaf op hom afpyl.

“Nou kyk hier, Dompeldorius,” sê hy en hy waai sy vinger dreigend. “Ek het jou nog altyd vrye teuels gegee. Ek het baie respek vir jou gehad. Ek mag nie met al jou besluite saamgestem het nie, maar ek het stilgebly. Daar is nie baie wat jou sal toelaat om weerwolwe aan te stel of vir Hagrid te behou of om te besluit wat om vir jou studente te leer sonder verwysing na die Ministerie nie. Maar as jy my gaan teenwerk –”

“Die enigste een teen wie ek gaan werk,” sê Dompeldorius, “is die Heer Woldemort. As jy teen hom is, Cornelius, dan is ons nog steeds aan dieselfde kant.”

Dit lyk asof Broddelwerk nie aan ’n antwoord hierop kan dink nie. Vir

'n paar oomblikke wieg hy op en neer op sy klein voetjies en draai sy hardbolkeil in sy hande rond.

Uiteindelik sê hy met 'n sweem van 'n pleidooi in sy stem, "Hy kan nie terug wees nie, Dompeldorius, hy kan net nie . . ."

Dan tree Snerp vorentoe, verby Dompeldorius. In die loop stoot hy die mou van sy kleed op. Hy steek sy voorarm uit en wys dit vir Broddelwerk wat terugdeins.

"Daar," sê Snerp skor. "Daar. Die Donker Merk. Dit is nie so helder soos dit 'n uur of wat gelede was nie. Toe het dit swart gegloei, maar jy kan dit nog steeds sien. Die teken is deur die Donker Heer op elke Doodseter ingebrand. Dit was 'n metode om mekaar te herken en sy manier om ons na hom te roep. Wanneer hy die Merk van enige Doodseter aanraak, moet ons almal onmiddellik Disappareer en by hom Appareer. Die Merk word nog die hele jaar duideliker. Karkaroff s'n ook. Hoekom dink jy het Karkaroff vannag gevlug? Albei van ons het die Merk voel brand. Albei van ons weet dat hy terug is. Karkaroff vrees die Donker Heer se wraak. Hy het te veel van sy mede-Doodseters verraai om terugverwelkom te word."

Nou tree Broddelwerk ook van Snerp af weg. Hy skud sy kop. Dit lyk asof hy nie 'n woord van wat Snerp gesê het, ingeneem het nie. Hy staar, oënskynlik gewalg, na die lelike merk op Snerp se arm. Dan kyk hy op na Dompeldorius en fluister, "Ek weet nie waarmee jy en jou personeel besig is nie, Dompeldorius, maar ek het genoeg gehoor. Ek het niks om by te voeg nie. Ek sal môre met jou in aanraking kom, Dompeldorius, om die werksaamhede van die skool te bespreek. Ek moet terug na die Ministerie toe gaan."

Hy is amper by die deur toe hy vassteek. Hy draai om, stap terug na die slaapsaal en gaan staan langs Harry se bed.

"Jou prys," sê hy kortaf toe hy 'n groot sak goud uit sy binnesak haal en op Harry se bedkassie laat val. "Eenduisend Galjoene. Daar moes 'n oorhandigingseremonie gewees het, maar onder die omstandighede . . ."

Hy druk sy hardbolkeil op sy kop, stap uit die vertrek en slaan die deur agter hom toe. Die oomblik toe hy verdwyn, draai Dompeldorius na die groep om Harry se bed.

"Daar is werk wat gedoen moet word," sê hy. "Molly . . . is ek reg as ek dink dat ek op jou en Arthur kan staatmaak?"

"Natuurlik kan jy," sê mev. Weasley. Sy is wit om die mond, maar sy lyk vasberade. "Hy weet wat Broddelwerk is. Dit is Arthur se voorliefde vir Moggels wat hom nog al die jare by die Ministerie teruggehou het. Broddelwerk dink dat hy nie oor towenaarstrots beskik nie."

"Dan moet ek 'n boodskap vir hom stuur," sê Dompeldorius. "Almal vir wie ons van die waarheid kan oortuig, moet onmiddellik in kennis gestel word en Arthur is redelik goed geplaas om diegene by die Ministerie te kontak wat nie so kortsigtig soos Cornelius is nie."

“Ek sal na Pa gaan,” sê Bill en hy kom orent. “Ek sal nou gaan.”

“Eersteklas,” sê Dompeldorius. “Vertel hom wat gebeur het. Sê vir hom dat ek binnekort self met hom kontak sal maak. Ily moet egter diskreet wees. As Broddelwerk moet dink dat ek by die Ministerie inmeng –”

“Los dit in my hande,” sê Bill.

Hy druk Harry se skouer, soen sy ma op die wang, gooi sy mantel om en stap vinnig by die vertrek uit.

“Minerva,” sê Dompeldorius toe hy na professor McGonagall draai, “ek moet vir Hagrid so gou moontlik in my kantoor sien. En ook – indien sy sal instem om te kom – vir Madame Maxine.”

Professor McGonagall knik en stap sonder ’n woord uit.

“Poppie,” sê Dompeldorius vir Madame Pomfrey, “sal jy so vriendelik wees om na professor Moodie se kantoor te gaan waar ek verwag dat jy ’n baie ontstelde huisself met die naam Knipogies sal kry. Doen wat jy kan vir haar en neem haar terug kombuis toe. Ek dink Dobbi sal vir ons na haar kyk.”

“Goed – goed,” sê Madame Pomfrey wat oorbluf lyk en sy stap ook uit.

Dompeldorius maak seker dat die deur toe is en dat Madame Pomfrey se voetstappe weggesteef het voor hy weer praat.

“En nou,” sê hy, “is dit tyd dat twee van ons groepie mekaar herken vir wat hulle is. Sirius . . . neem jou ware vorm aan.”

Die groot swart hond kyk op na Dompeldorius en verander dan binne ’n oogwenk terug in ’n man.

Mev. Weasley skree en spring van die bed af.

“Sirius Swardt!” gil sy en wys na hom.

“Ma, bly tog stil!” gil Ron. “Dis oukei!”

Snerp het nie gegil of agteruit gespring nie, maar die uitdrukking op sy gesig is een van woede en afsku.

“Hy!” snou hy en staar na Sirius op wie se gesig net soveel minagting geskryf is. “Wat maak hy hier?”

“Hy is hier op my uitnodiging,” sê Dompeldorius terwyl hy na die twee van hulle kyk, “net soos jy, Severus. Ek vertrou albei van julle. Dit is tyd dat julle jul ou verskille neerlê en mekaar vertrou.”

Harry dink dat Dompeldorius in wonderwerke moet glo, want Sirius en Snerp staar met die grootste afsku na mekaar.

“Vir die kort termyn,” sê Dompeldorius met ’n sweem van ongeduld in sy stem, “sal ek ’n gebrek aan openlike vyandigheid aanvaar. Julle sal hand skud. Julle is nou aan dieselfde kant. Die tyd is min en tensy die paar van ons saamstaan wat weet wat die waarheid is, is daar geen hoop vir enige van ons nie.”

Baie stadig – en terwyl hulle nog steeds na mekaar gluur asof hulle mekaar net slegte dinge toewens – beweeg Sirius en Snerp nader en skud mekaar se hand. Hulle laat besonder vinnig weer los.

“Dit is genoeg om mee te begin,” sê Dompeldorius toe hy tussen hulle tree. “Nou het ek werk vir julle. Broddelwerk se houding, hoewel nie onverwags nie, verander alles. Sirius, jy moet dadelik vertrek. Jy moet vir Remus Lupin, Arabelle Figg, Mundungus Fletcher – die ou groep – in kennis gaan stel. Vertoef ’n bietjie by Lupin, ek sal jou daar kontak.”

“Maar –” sê Harry.

Hy wil hê dat Sirius moet bly. Hy wil nie so gou al weer groet nie.

“Jy sal my gou weer sien, Harry,” sê Sirius toe hy na hom draai. “Ek belowe. Maar ek moet doen wat ek kan, jy verstaan, nè?”

“Ja,” sê Harry. “Ja . . . natuurlik verstaan ek.”

Sirius gryp sy hand vlugtig, knik vir Dompeldorius, verander weer in die swart hond en hardloop oor die vloer na die deur waar hy die knop met sy poot draai. Dan is hy weg.

“Severus,” sê Dompeldorius toe hy na Snerp draai, “jy weet wat ek jou moet vra om te doen. As jy gereed is . . . as jy bereid is . . .”

“Ek is,” sê Snerp.

Hy lyk effens bleker as gewoonlik en sy koue swart oë glinster vreemd.

“Sterkte dan,” sê Dompeldorius en hy kyk met ’n besorgde trek op sy gesig hoe Snerp sonder ’n woord agter Sirius aan verdwyn.

Etlike minute gaan verby voor Dompeldorius weer praat.

“Ek moet ondertoe gaan,” sê hy uiteindelik. “Ek moet die Diggorys gaan sien. Harry – drink die res van jou towerdrankie. Ek sal julle almal later sien.”

Toe Dompeldorius verdwyn, val Harry terug teen die kussings. Hermien, Ron en mev. Weasley kyk almal na hom. Vir ’n lang tyd sê niemand ’n woord nie.

“Jy moet die res van jou towerdrankie drink, Harry,” sê mev. Weasley uiteindelik. Haar hand stamp teen die sak goud op sy bedkassie toe sy die bottel en die beker optel. “Jy moet lekker lank slaap. Probeer om ’n bietjie aan iets anders te dink . . . wat jy alles met jou prysgoud gaan koop!”

“Ek wil nie daardie goud hê nie,” sê Harry in ’n toonlose stem. “Neem julle dit. Enigeen kan dit kry. Ek moes dit nie gewen het nie. Dit moes Cedric s’n gewees het.”

Die ding waarteen hy nog die hele tyd veg sedert hy uit die doolhof gekom het, dreig nou om hom te oorweldig. Hy voel ’n brandende, jeukerige sensasie in die binneste hoeke van sy oë. Hy knipper sy ooglede en staar na die plafon.

“Dit was nie jou skuld nie, Harry,” fluister mev. Weasley.

“Ek het vir hom gesê om saam met my aan die Beker te vat,” sê Harry. Nou is die brandende gevoel in sy keel ook. Hy wens Ron wil wegkyk.

Mev. Weasley sit die towerdrankie op die bedkassie neer, buk af en vou haar arms om Harry. Hy kan nie onthou dat hy al ooit so omhels is nie,

net soos deur 'n ma. Dis of die volle impak van alles waardeur hy daar-
die nag is, op hom neerdaal toe mev. Weasley hom teen haar vasdruk. Sy
ma se gesig, sy pa se stem, die gesig van Cedric, dood op die grond, alles
draai deur sy kop tot hy dit glad nie meer kan uithou nie, tot hy sy gesig
moet vertrek teen die troostelose kreet wat veg om uit hom los te breek.

Daar is 'n harde klapgeluid en mev. Weasley en Harry spring uit-
mekaar. Hermien staan by die venster. Sy hou iets styf in haar hand vas.

“Jammer,” fluister sy.

“Jou towerdrankie, Harry,” sê mev. Weasley vinnig terwyl sy haar oë
met die agterkant van haar hand afvee.

Harry slaan dit met een sluk weg. Die uitwerking is onmiddellik.
Swaar, onweerstaanbare golwe van droomlose slaap breek oor hom. Hy
val terug teen sy kussings en dink aan niks meer nie.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



THE BEGINNING

When he looked back, even a month later, Harry found he had only scattered memories of the next few days. It was as though he had been through too much to take in any more. The recollections he did have were very painful. The worst, perhaps, was the meeting with the Diggorys that took place the following morning.

They did not blame him for what had happened; on the contrary, both thanked him for returning Cedric's body to them. Mr. Diggory sobbed through most of the interview. Mrs. Diggory's grief seemed to be beyond tears.

"He suffered very little then," she said, when Harry had told her how Cedric had died. "And after all, Amos . . . he died just when he'd won the tournament. He must have been happy."

When they got to their feet, she looked down at Harry and said,

“You look after yourself, now.”

Harry seized the sack of gold on the bedside table.

“You take this,” he muttered to her. “It should’ve been Cedric’s, he got there first, you take it —”

But she backed away from him.

“Oh no, it’s yours, dear, I couldn’t . . . you keep it.”

Harry returned to Gryffindor Tower the following evening. From what Hermione and Ron told him, Dumbledore had spoken to the school that morning at breakfast. He had merely requested that they leave Harry alone, that nobody ask him questions or badger him to tell the story of what had happened in the maze. Most people, he noticed, were skirting him in the corridors, avoiding his eyes. Some whispered behind their hands as he passed. He guessed that many of them had believed Rita Skeeter’s article about how disturbed and possibly dangerous he was. Perhaps they were formulating their own theories about how Cedric had died. He found he didn’t care very much. He liked it best when he was with Ron and Hermione and they were talking about other things, or else letting him sit in silence while they played chess. He felt as though all three of them had reached an understanding they didn’t need to put into words; that each was waiting for some sign, some word, of what was going on outside Hogwarts — and that it was useless to speculate about what might be coming until they knew anything for certain. The only time they touched upon the subject was when Ron told Harry about a meeting Mrs. Weasley had had with Dumbledore before going home.

“She went to ask him if you could come straight to us this

summer,” he said. “But he wants you to go back to the Dursleys, at least at first.”

“Why?” said Harry.

“She said Dumbledore’s got his reasons,” said Ron, shaking his head darkly. “I suppose we’ve got to trust him, haven’t we?”

The only person apart from Ron and Hermione that Harry felt able to talk to was Hagrid. As there was no longer a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, they had those lessons free. They used the one on Thursday afternoon to go down and visit Hagrid in his cabin. It was a bright and sunny day; Fang bounded out of the open door as they approached, barking and wagging his tail madly.

“Who’s that?” called Hagrid, coming to the door. “*Harry!*”

He strode out to meet them, pulled Harry into a one-armed hug, ruffled his hair, and said, “Good ter see yeh, mate. Good ter see yeh.”

They saw two bucket-size cups and saucers on the wooden table in front of the fireplace when they entered Hagrid’s cabin.

“Bin havin’ a cuppa with Olympe,” Hagrid said. “She’s jus’ left.”

“Who?” said Ron curiously.

“Madame Maxime, o’ course!” said Hagrid.

“You two made up, have you?” said Ron.

“Dunno what yeh’re talkin’ about,” said Hagrid airily, fetching more cups from the dresser. When he had made tea and offered around a plate of doughy cookies, he leaned back in his chair and surveyed Harry closely through his beetle-black eyes.

“You all righ’?” he said gruffly.

“Yeah,” said Harry.

“No, yeh’re not,” said Hagrid. “Course yeh’re not. But yeh will be.”

Harry said nothing.

“Knew he was goin’ ter come back,” said Hagrid, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked up at him, shocked. “Known it fer years, Harry. Knew he was out there, bidin’ his time. It had ter happen. Well, now it has, an’ we’ll jus’ have ter get on with it. We’ll fight. Migh’ be able ter stop him before he gets a good hold. That’s Dumbledore’s plan, anyway. Great man, Dumbledore. ’S long as we’ve got him, I’m not too worried.”

Hagrid raised his bushy eyebrows at the disbelieving expressions on their faces.

“No good sittin’ worryin’ abou’ it,” he said. “What’s comin’ will come, an’ we’ll meet it when it does. Dumbledore told me wha’ you did, Harry.”

Hagrid’s chest swelled as he looked at Harry.

“Yeh did as much as yer father would’ve done, an’ I can’ give yeh no higher praise than that.”

Harry smiled back at him. It was the first time he’d smiled in days. “What’s Dumbledore asked you to do, Hagrid?” he asked. “He sent Professor McGonagall to ask you and Madame Maxime to meet him — that night.”

“Got a little job fer me over the summer,” said Hagrid. “Secret, though. I’m not s’posed ter talk abou’ it, no, not even ter you lot. Olympe — Madame Maxime ter you — might be comin’ with me. I think she will. Think I got her persuaded.”

“Is it to do with Voldemort?”

Hagrid flinched at the sound of the name.

“Migh’ be,” he said evasively. “Now . . . who’d like ter come an’ visit the las’ skrewt with me? I was jokin’ — jokin’!” he added hastily, seeing the looks on their faces.

It was with a heavy heart that Harry packed his trunk up in the dormitory on the night before his return to Privet Drive. He was dreading the Leaving Feast, which was usually a cause for celebration, when the winner of the Inter-House Championship would be announced. He had avoided being in the Great Hall when it was full ever since he had left the hospital wing, preferring to eat when it was nearly empty to avoid the stares of his fellow students.

When he, Ron, and Hermione entered the Hall, they saw at once that the usual decorations were missing. The Great Hall was normally decorated with the winning House’s colors for the Leaving Feast. Tonight, however, there were black drapes on the wall behind the teachers’ table. Harry knew instantly that they were there as a mark of respect to Cedric.

The real Mad-Eye Moody was at the staff table now, his wooden leg and his magical eye back in place. He was extremely twitchy, jumping every time someone spoke to him. Harry couldn’t blame him; Moody’s fear of attack was bound to have been increased by his ten-month imprisonment in his own trunk. Professor Karkaroff’s chair was empty. Harry wondered, as he sat down with the other Gryffindors, where Karkaroff was now, and whether Voldemort had caught up with him.

Madame Maxime was still there. She was sitting next to Hagrid.

They were talking quietly together. Further along the table, sitting next to Professor McGonagall, was Snape. His eyes lingered on Harry for a moment as Harry looked at him. His expression was difficult to read. He looked as sour and unpleasant as ever. Harry continued to watch him, long after Snape had looked away.

What was it that Snape had done on Dumbledore's orders, the night that Voldemort had returned? And why . . . *why* . . . was Dumbledore so convinced that Snape was truly on their side? He had been their spy, Dumbledore had said so in the Pensieve. Snape had turned spy against Voldemort, "at great personal risk." Was that the job he had taken up again? Had he made contact with the Death Eaters, perhaps? Pretended that he had never really gone over to Dumbledore, that he had been, like Voldemort himself, biding his time?

Harry's musings were ended by Professor Dumbledore, who stood up at the staff table. The Great Hall, which in any case had been less noisy than it usually was at the Leaving Feast, became very quiet.

"The end," said Dumbledore, looking around at them all, "of another year."

He paused, and his eyes fell upon the Hufflepuff table. Theirs had been the most subdued table before he had gotten to his feet, and theirs were still the saddest and palest faces in the Hall.

"There is much that I would like to say to you all tonight," said Dumbledore, "but I must first acknowledge the loss of a very fine person, who should be sitting here," he gestured toward the Hufflepuffs, "enjoying our feast with us. I would like you all, please, to stand, and raise your glasses, to Cedric Diggory."

They did it, all of them; the benches scraped as everyone in the Hall stood, and raised their goblets, and echoed, in one loud, low, rumbling voice, “Cedric Diggory.”

Harry caught a glimpse of Cho through the crowd. There were tears pouring silently down her face. He looked down at the table as they all sat down again.

“Cedric was a person who exemplified many of the qualities that distinguish Hufflepuff House,” Dumbledore continued. “He was a good and loyal friend, a hard worker, he valued fair play. His death has affected you all, whether you knew him well or not. I think that you have the right, therefore, to know exactly how it came about.”

Harry raised his head and stared at Dumbledore.

“Cedric Diggory was murdered by Lord Voldemort.”

A panicked whisper swept the Great Hall. People were staring at Dumbledore in disbelief, in horror. He looked perfectly calm as he watched them mutter themselves into silence.

“The Ministry of Magic,” Dumbledore continued, “does not wish me to tell you this. It is possible that some of your parents will be horrified that I have done so — either because they will not believe that Lord Voldemort has returned, or because they think I should not tell you so, young as you are. It is my belief, however, that the truth is generally preferable to lies, and that any attempt to pretend that Cedric died as the result of an accident, or some sort of blunder of his own, is an insult to his memory.”

Stunned and frightened, every face in the Hall was turned toward Dumbledore now . . . or almost every face. Over at the Slytherin table, Harry saw Draco Malfoy muttering something to Crabbe and

Goyle. Harry felt a hot, sick swoop of anger in his stomach. He forced himself to look back at Dumbledore.

“There is somebody else who must be mentioned in connection with Cedric’s death,” Dumbledore went on. “I am talking, of course, about Harry Potter.”

A kind of ripple crossed the Great Hall as a few heads turned in Harry’s direction before flicking back to face Dumbledore.

“Harry Potter managed to escape Lord Voldemort,” said Dumbledore. “He risked his own life to return Cedric’s body to Hogwarts. He showed, in every respect, the sort of bravery that few wizards have ever shown in facing Lord Voldemort, and for this, I honor him.”

Dumbledore turned gravely to Harry and raised his goblet once more. Nearly everyone in the Great Hall followed suit. They murmured his name, as they had murmured Cedric’s, and drank to him. But through a gap in the standing figures, Harry saw that Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and many of the other Slytherins had remained defiantly in their seats, their goblets untouched. Dumbledore, who after all possessed no magical eye, did not see them.

When everyone had once again resumed their seats, Dumbledore continued, “The Triwizard Tournament’s aim was to further and promote magical understanding. In the light of what has happened — of Lord Voldemort’s return — such ties are more important than ever before.”

Dumbledore looked from Madame Maxime and Hagrid, to Fleur Delacour and her fellow Beauxbatons students, to Viktor Krum and the Durmstrangs at the Slytherin table. Krum, Harry saw, looked

wary, almost frightened, as though he expected Dumbledore to say something harsh.

“Every guest in this Hall,” said Dumbledore, and his eyes lingered upon the Durmstrang students, “will be welcomed back here at any time, should they wish to come. I say to you all, once again — in the light of Lord Voldemort’s return, we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. Lord Voldemort’s gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open.

“It is my belief — and never have I so hoped that I am mistaken — that we are all facing dark and difficult times. Some of you in this Hall have already suffered directly at the hands of Lord Voldemort. Many of your families have been torn asunder. A week ago, a student was taken from our midst.

“Remember Cedric. Remember, if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy, remember what happened to a boy who was good, and kind, and brave, because he strayed across the path of Lord Voldemort. Remember Cedric Diggory.”

Harry’s trunk was packed; Hedwig was back in her cage on top of it. He, Ron, and Hermione were waiting in the crowded entrance hall with the rest of the fourth years for the carriages that would take them back to Hogsmeade station. It was another beautiful summer’s day. He supposed that Privet Drive would be hot and leafy, its flower beds a riot of color, when he arrived there that evening. The thought

gave him no pleasure at all.

“’Arry!”

He looked around. Fleur Delacour was hurrying up the stone steps into the castle. Beyond her, far across the grounds, Harry could see Hagrid helping Madame Maxime to back two of the giant horses into their harness. The Beauxbatons carriage was about to take off.

“We will see each uzzer again, I ’ope,” said Fleur as she reached him, holding out her hand. “I am ’oping to get a job ’ere, to improve my Eenglish.”

“It’s very good already,” said Ron in a strangled sort of voice. Fleur smiled at him; Hermione scowled.

“Good-bye, ’Arry,” said Fleur, turning to go. “It ’az been a pleasure meeting you!”

Harry’s spirits couldn’t help but lift slightly as he watched Fleur hurry back across the lawns to Madame Maxime, her silvery hair rippling in the sunlight.

“Wonder how the Durmstrang students are getting back,” said Ron. “D’you reckon they can steer that ship without Karkaroff?”

“Karkaroff did not steer,” said a gruff voice. “He stayed in his cabin and let us do the vork.”

Krum had come to say good-bye to Hermione.

“Could I have a vord?” he asked her.

“Oh . . . yes . . . all right,” said Hermione, looking slightly flustered, and following Krum through the crowd and out of sight.

“You’d better hurry up!” Ron called loudly after her. “The carriages’ll be here in a minute!”

He let Harry keep a watch for the carriages, however, and spent

the next few minutes craning his neck over the crowd to try and see what Krum and Hermione might be up to. They returned quite soon. Ron stared at Hermione, but her face was quite impassive.

“I liked Diggory,” said Krum abruptly to Harry. “He vos always polite to me. Always. Even though I vos from Durmstrang — with Karkaroff,” he added, scowling.

“Have you got a new headmaster yet?” said Harry.

Krum shrugged. He held out his hand as Fleur had done, shook Harry’s hand, and then Ron’s. Ron looked as though he was suffering some sort of painful internal struggle. Krum had already started walking away when Ron burst out, “Can I have your autograph?”

Hermione turned away, smiling at the horseless carriages that were now trundling toward them up the drive, as Krum, looking surprised but gratified, signed a fragment of parchment for Ron.

The weather could not have been more different on the journey back to King’s Cross than it had been on their way to Hogwarts the previous September. There wasn’t a single cloud in the sky. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had managed to get a compartment to themselves. Pigwidgeon was once again hidden under Ron’s dress robes to stop him from hooting continually; Hedwig was dozing, her head under her wing, and Crookshanks was curled up in a spare seat like a large, furry ginger cushion. Harry, Ron, and Hermione talked more fully and freely than they had all week as the train sped them southward. Harry felt as though Dumbledore’s speech at the Leaving Feast had unblocked him, somehow. It was less painful to discuss what had happened now. They broke off their conversation about what action

Dumbledore might be taking, even now, to stop Voldemort only when the lunch trolley arrived.

When Hermione returned from the trolley and put her money back into her schoolbag, she dislodged a copy of the *Daily Prophet* that she had been carrying in there. Harry looked at it, unsure whether he really wanted to know what it might say, but Hermione, seeing him looking at it, said calmly, “There’s nothing in there. You can look for yourself, but there’s nothing at all. I’ve been checking every day. Just a small piece the day after the third task saying you won the tournament. They didn’t even mention Cedric. Nothing about any of it. If you ask me, Fudge is forcing them to keep quiet.”

“He’ll never keep Rita quiet,” said Harry. “Not on a story like this.”

“Oh, Rita hasn’t written anything at all since the third task,” said Hermione in an oddly constrained voice. “As a matter of fact,” she added, her voice now trembling slightly, “Rita Skeeter isn’t going to be writing anything at all for a while. Not unless she wants me to spill the beans on *her*.”

“What are you talking about?” said Ron.

“I found out how she was listening in on private conversations when she wasn’t supposed to be coming onto the grounds,” said Hermione in a rush.

Harry had the impression that Hermione had been dying to tell them this for days, but that she had restrained herself in light of everything else that had happened.

“How was she doing it?” said Harry at once.

“How did you find out?” said Ron, staring at her.

“Well, it was you, really, who gave me the idea, Harry,” she said.

“Did I?” said Harry, perplexed. “How?”

“*Bugging*,” said Hermione happily.

“But you said they didn’t work —”

“Oh not *electronic* bugs,” said Hermione. “No, you see . . . Rita Skeeter” — Hermione’s voice trembled with quiet triumph — “is an unregistered Animagus. She can turn —”

Hermione pulled a small sealed glass jar out of her bag.

“— into a beetle.”

“You’re kidding,” said Ron. “You haven’t . . . she’s not . . .”

“Oh yes she is,” said Hermione happily, brandishing the jar at them.

Inside were a few twigs and leaves and one large, fat beetle.

“That’s never — you’re kidding —” Ron whispered, lifting the jar to his eyes.

“No, I’m not,” said Hermione, beaming. “I caught her on the windowsill in the hospital wing. Look very closely, and you’ll notice the markings around her antennae are exactly like those foul glasses she wears.”

Harry looked and saw that she was quite right. He also remembered something.

“There was a beetle on the statue the night we heard Hagrid telling Madame Maxime about his mum!”

“Exactly,” said Hermione. “And Viktor pulled a beetle out of my hair after we’d had our conversation by the lake. And unless I’m very much mistaken, Rita was perched on the windowsill of the

Divination class the day your scar hurt. She's been buzzing around for stories all year."

"When we saw Malfoy under that tree . . ." said Ron slowly.

"He was talking to her, in his hand," said Hermione. "He knew, of course. That's how she's been getting all those nice little interviews with the Slytherins. They wouldn't care that she was doing something illegal, as long as they were giving her horrible stuff about us and Hagrid."

Hermione took the glass jar back from Ron and smiled at the beetle, which buzzed angrily against the glass.

"I've told her I'll let her out when we get back to London," said Hermione. "I've put an Unbreakable Charm on the jar, you see, so she can't transform. And I've told her she's to keep her quill to herself for a whole year. See if she can't break the habit of writing horrible lies about people."

Smiling serenely, Hermione placed the beetle back inside her schoolbag.

The door of the compartment slid open.

"Very clever, Granger," said Draco Malfoy.

Crabbe and Goyle were standing behind him. All three of them looked more pleased with themselves, more arrogant and more menacing, than Harry had ever seen them.

"So," said Malfoy slowly, advancing slightly into the compartment and looking slowly around at them, a smirk quivering on his lips. "You caught some pathetic reporter, and Potter's Dumbledore's favorite boy again. Big deal."

His smirk widened. Crabbe and Goyle leered.

“Trying not to think about it, are we?” said Malfoy softly, looking around at all three of them. “Trying to pretend it hasn’t happened?”

“Get out,” said Harry.

He had not been this close to Malfoy since he had watched him muttering to Crabbe and Goyle during Dumbledore’s speech about Cedric. He could feel a kind of ringing in his ears. His hand gripped his wand under his robes.

“You’ve picked the losing side, Potter! I warned you! I told you you ought to choose your company more carefully, remember? When we met on the train, first day at Hogwarts? I told you not to hang around with riffraff like this!” He jerked his head at Ron and Hermione. “Too late now, Potter! They’ll be the first to go, now the Dark Lord’s back! Mudbloods and Muggle-lovers first! Well — second — Diggory was the f—”

It was as though someone had exploded a box of fireworks within the compartment. Blinded by the blaze of the spells that had blasted from every direction, deafened by a series of bangs, Harry blinked and looked down at the floor.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were all lying unconscious in the doorway. He, Ron, and Hermione were on their feet, all three of them having used a different hex. Nor were they the only ones to have done so.

“Thought we’d see what those three were up to,” said Fred matter-of-factly, stepping onto Goyle and into the compartment. He had his wand out, and so did George, who was careful to tread on Malfoy as he followed Fred inside.

“Interesting effect,” said George, looking down at Crabbe. “Who

used the Furnunculus Curse?”

“Me,” said Harry.

“Odd,” said George lightly. “I used Jelly-Legs. Looks as though those two shouldn’t be mixed. He seems to have sprouted little tentacles all over his face. Well, let’s not leave them here, they don’t add much to the decor.”

Ron, Harry, and George kicked, rolled, and pushed the unconscious Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle — each of whom looked distinctly the worse for the jumble of jinxes with which they had been hit — out into the corridor, then came back into the compartment and rolled the door shut.

“Exploding Snap, anyone?” said Fred, pulling out a pack of cards.

They were halfway through their fifth game when Harry decided to ask them.

“You going to tell us, then?” he said to George. “Who you were blackmailing?”

“Oh,” said George darkly. “*That.*”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Fred, shaking his head impatiently. “It wasn’t anything important. Not now, anyway.”

“We’ve given up,” said George, shrugging.

But Harry, Ron, and Hermione kept on asking, and finally, Fred said, “All right, all right, if you really want to know . . . it was Ludo Bagman.”

“Bagman?” said Harry sharply. “Are you saying he was involved in —”

“Nah,” said George gloomily. “Nothing like that. Stupid git. He wouldn’t have the brains.”

“Well, what, then?” said Ron.

Fred hesitated, then said, “You remember that bet we had with him at the Quidditch World Cup? About how Ireland would win, but Krum would get the Snitch?”

“Yeah,” said Harry and Ron slowly.

“Well, the git paid us in leprechaun gold he’d caught from the Irish mascots.”

“So?”

“So,” said Fred impatiently, “it vanished, didn’t it? By next morning, it had gone!”

“But — it must’ve been an accident, mustn’t it?” said Hermione.

George laughed very bitterly.

“Yeah, that’s what we thought, at first. We thought if we just wrote to him, and told him he’d made a mistake, he’d cough up. But nothing doing. Ignored our letter. We kept trying to talk to him about it at Hogwarts, but he was always making some excuse to get away from us.”

“In the end, he turned pretty nasty,” said Fred. “Told us we were too young to gamble, and he wasn’t giving us anything.”

“So we asked for our money back,” said George, glowering.

“He didn’t refuse!” gasped Hermione.

“Right in one,” said Fred.

“But that was all your savings!” said Ron.

“Tell me about it,” said George. “Course, we found out what was going on in the end. Lee Jordan’s dad had had a bit of trouble getting money off Bagman as well. Turns out he’s in big trouble with the

goblins. Borrowed loads of gold off them. A gang of them cornered him in the woods after the World Cup and took all the gold he had, and it still wasn't enough to cover all his debts. They followed him all the way to Hogwarts to keep an eye on him. He's lost everything gambling. Hasn't got two Galleons to rub together. And you know how the idiot tried to pay the goblins back?"

"How?" said Harry.

"He put a bet on you, mate," said Fred. "Put a big bet on you to win the tournament. Bet against the goblins."

"So *that's* why he kept trying to help me win!" said Harry. "Well — I did win, didn't I? So he can pay you your gold!"

"Nope," said George, shaking his head. "The goblins play as dirty as him. They say you drew with Diggory, and Bagman was betting you'd win outright. So Bagman had to run for it. He did run for it right after the third task."

George sighed deeply and started dealing out the cards again.

The rest of the journey passed pleasantly enough; Harry wished it could have gone on all summer, in fact, and that he would never arrive at King's Cross . . . but as he had learned the hard way that year, time will not slow down when something unpleasant lies ahead, and all too soon, the Hogwarts Express was pulling in at platform nine and three-quarters. The usual confusion and noise filled the corridors as the students began to disembark. Ron and Hermione struggled out past Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, carrying their trunks. Harry, however, stayed put.

"Fred — George — wait a moment."

The twins turned. Harry pulled open his trunk and drew out his

Triwizard winnings.

“Take it,” he said, and he thrust the sack into George’s hands.

“What?” said Fred, looking flabbergasted.

“Take it,” Harry repeated firmly. “I don’t want it.”

“You’re mental,” said George, trying to push it back at Harry.

“No, I’m not,” said Harry. “You take it, and get inventing. It’s for the joke shop.”

“He *is* mental,” Fred said in an almost awed voice.

“Listen,” said Harry firmly. “If you don’t take it, I’m throwing it down the drain. I don’t want it and I don’t need it. But I could do with a few laughs. We could all do with a few laughs. I’ve got a feeling we’re going to need them more than usual before long.”

“Harry,” said George weakly, weighing the money bag in his hands, “there’s got to be a thousand Galleons in here.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, grinning. “Think how many Canary Creams that is.”

The twins stared at him.

“Just don’t tell your mum where you got it . . . although she might not be so keen for you to join the Ministry anymore, come to think of it . . .”

“Harry,” Fred began, but Harry pulled out his wand.

“Look,” he said flatly, “take it, or I’ll hex you. I know some good ones now. Just do me one favor, okay? Buy Ron some different dress robes and say they’re from you.”

He left the compartment before they could say another word, stepping over Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were still lying on the

floor, covered in hex marks.

Uncle Vernon was waiting beyond the barrier. Mrs. Weasley was close by him. She hugged Harry very tightly when she saw him and whispered in his ear, “I think Dumbledore will let you come to us later in the summer. Keep in touch, Harry.”

“See you, Harry,” said Ron, clapping him on the back.

“Bye, Harry!” said Hermione, and she did something she had never done before, and kissed him on the cheek.

“Harry — thanks,” George muttered, while Fred nodded fervently at his side.

Harry winked at them, turned to Uncle Vernon, and followed him silently from the station. There was no point worrying yet, he told himself, as he got into the back of the Dursleys’ car.

As Hagrid had said, what would come, would come . . . and he would have to meet it when it did.

Die Begin

Wanneer hy terugdink, selfs 'n maand later, vind Harry dat hy die volgende paar dae skaars kan onthou. Dis asof hy deur te veel was om enigiets anders te kon inneem. Die herinnerings wat hy wel het, is baie pynlik. Hiervan was die ontmoeting met mnr. en mev. Diggory die volgende oggend waarskynlik die ergste.

Hulle het hom nie geblameer vir wat gebeur het nie; intendeel, hulle het hom bedank dat hy Cedric se liggaam vir hulle teruggebring het. Mnr. Diggory het feitlik die hele tyd gesnik. Dit was egter of mev. Diggory se hartseer anderkant trane gelê het.

“Dan het hy baie min gely,” het sy gesê toe Harry haar vertel hoe Cedric gesterf het. “En Amos . . . hy het na alles gesterf net nadat hy die Toernooi gewen het. Hy moet baie gelukkig gewees het.”

Toe hulle opstaan, kyk sy na Harry en sê, “Jy moet jouself nou mooi oppas, hoor.”

Harry het die sak goud op die bedkassie opgetel.

“Neem dit,” het hy gemompel. “Dit moes Cedric s'n gewees het, hy was eerste daar, neem dit —”

Sy het egter teruggetree. “O, nee, kind, dis joune, ons kan nie . . . hou jy dit.”

Die volgende aand is Harry terug na die Griffindortoring. Volgens wat Hermien en Ron hom vertel het, het Dompeldorius daardie oggend tydens ontbyt met die skool gepraat. Hy het eenvoudig gevra dat hulle Harry moet uitlos en dat niemand hom moet pla om die storie van wat in die doolhof gebeur het te vertel nie. Harry kom agter dat die meeste ouens hom in die gange vermy en nie in sy oë kyk nie. Sommige fluister agter hul hande as hy verbystap. Hy reken dat baie van hulle Rika Skinner se artikel glo oor hoe versteurd en potensieel gevaarlik hy is. Dalk maak hulle hul eie teorieë op oor hoe Cedric dood is. Dit kan hom nie juis skeel nie. Hy is op sy gelukkigste as hy saam met Ron en Hermien is en hulle oor ander goed praat, of as hulle hom in stilte by hulle laat sit terwyl hulle skaak speel. Dit voel vir hom asof hulle drie 'n verstand-

houding bereik het waaroor hulle nie hoef te praat nie; dat elkeen wag vir 'n teken, 'n woord, van wat buitekant Hogwarts aangaan – en dat dit sinneloos is om te gis oor wat kan gebeur voor hulle iets vir seker gehoor het. Die enigste keer dat hulle aan die onderwerp raak, is toe Ron vir Harry vertel dat mev. Weasley kort voor sy huis toe is vir Dompeldorius gaan sien het.

“Sy’t hom gevra of jy hierdie somervakansie reguit na ons toe kan kom,” sê hy, “maar hy wil hê jy moet na die Dursleys toe gaan, ten minste vir 'n rukkie.”

“Hoekom?” vra Harry.

“Sy sê Dompeldorius het sy redes,” sê Ron terwyl hy sy kop op geheimsinnige wyse skud. “Ons moet hom seker maar vertrou, nè?”

Die enigste persoon buiten Ron en Hermien met wie Harry vry voel om te praat, is Hagrid. Aangesien daar nie meer 'n onderwyser vir Verdediging teen die Donker Kunste is nie, het hulle hierdie klasse af. Hulle gebruik die een op Donderdagmiddag om na sy hut te gaan en by hom te gaan kuier. Dit is 'n helder en sonnige dag. Toe hulle naderkom, spring Tande by die oop deur uit en blaf en waai sy stert soos 'n mal ding.

“Wie’s daar?” roep Hagrid toe hy deur toe kom. “Harry!”

Hy stap hulle tegemoet, trek Harry met een arm nader, vryf sy hare deurmekaar en sê, “Goed om jou te sien, ou maat. Goed om jou te sien.”

Toe hulle by Hagrid se hut instap, sien hulle twee koppies so groot soos emmers en twee pierings op die houttafel voor die vuurherd.

“Het 'n teetjie saam met Olympe geniet,” sê Hagrid, “sy’s nou net weg.”

“Wie?” vra Ron nuuskierig.

“Madame Maxine, ‘tuurlik!” sê Hagrid.

“Is julle twee dan weer vriende?” vra Ron.

“Weet nie waarvan jy praat nie,” sê Hagrid lighartig terwyl hy nog koppies uit die kombuiskas haal. Toe hy die tee gemaak en 'n bord kluitjierige koekies vir almal aangebied het, leun hy terug in sy stoel en kyk stip na Harry met sy kewerswart oë.

“Is jy oukei?” vra hy skor.

“Ja,” sê Harry.

“Nee, jy is nie,” sê Hagrid. “Tuurlik is jy nie. Maar jy sal wees.”

Harry antwoord nie.

“Het geweet hy gaan terugkom,” sê Hagrid en Harry, Ron en Hermien kyk geskok op na hom. “Weet dit al vir jare, Harry. Het geweet dat hy daar iewers is en sy tyd af wag. Dit moet die een of ander tyd gebeur het. Wel, nou het dit en ons sal maar net die beste daarvan moet maak. Ons sal veg. Kan hom dalk keer voor hy sy voete behoorlik gevind het. Ten minste, dis Dompeldorius se plan. Groot man, Dompeldorius. Solank ons hom het, is ek nie te bekommerd nie.”

Hagrid lig sy woeste wenkbroue toe hy die ongelowige uitdrukking op hul gesigte sien.

“Gaan nie help om jou te sit en bekommer nie,” sê hy. “Wat gaan gebeur, gaan gebeur en ons sal moet optree wanneer dit kom. Dompeldorius het vir my gesê wat jy gedoen het, Harry.”

Hagrid se borskas swel toe hy na Harry kyk. “Jy’t gedoen wat jou pa sou gedoen het. Meer as dit kan ek jou nie prys nie.”

Harry glimlag vir hom. Dit is die eerste keer in dae dat hy glimlag.

“Wat het Dompeldorius vir jou gevra om te doen, Hagrid?” vra hy. “Hy’t vir professor McGonagall gestuur om vir jou en Madame Maxine te vra om na hom toe te kom . . . daardie nag.”

“Het ’n klein werkjie vir my in die somervakansie,” sê Hagrid. “Is ’n geheim. Ek mag nie daaroor praat nie, nie eens met julle klomp nie. Olympe – Madame Maxine vir julle – sal dalk saam met my gaan. Ek dink sy sal. Dink ek het haar oortuig.”

“Het dit iets met Woldemort te doen?”

Hagrid krimp ineen toe hy die naam hoor.

“Miskien,” sê hy ontwykend. “Nou . . . wie is lus om saam met my vir die laaste Krewel te gaan kuier? Net ’n grappie – net ’n grappie!” voeg hy haastig by toe hy die uitdrukking op hul gesigte sien.

Dis met ’n swaar hart dat Harry die aand voor hy terug Ligusterlaan toe moet gaan sy trommel daar bo in die slaapsaal pak. Hy sien glad nie uit na die Afskeidsfees nie. Gewoonlik is dit ’n rede vir groot feestelikheid wanneer die wenner van die Interhuis-Kampioenskap aangekondig word. Sedert hy uit die siekeboeg ontslaan is, vermy hy die Groot Saal wanneer dit vol is. Hy verkies om te gaan eet as dit amper leeg is om sodoende die starende oë van sy medestudente te vermy.

Toe hy, Ron en Hermien by die Saal instap, sien hulle dadelik dat die gewone versierings nie aangebring is nie. Die Groot Saal word gewoonlik vir die Afskeidsfees met die wenner se huiskleure versier. Vanaand hang daar egter swart drapeersels teen die muur agter die onderwysers se tafel. Harry weet dadelik dat dit ’n teken van respek vir Cedric is.

Die ware Maloog Moodie sit by die personeeltafel, sy houtbeen en sy magiese oog is terug. Hy kry die hele tyd trekkings en wip elke keer dat iemand met hom praat. Harry kan hom nie blameer nie; Moodie se vrees dat hy aangeval gaan word, moet nog erger wees na sy tien maande lange gevangeneskap in sy eie trommel. Professor Karkaroff se stoel is leeg. Toe Harry by die ander Griffindors gaan sit, wonder hy of Woldemort hom al in die hande gekry het.

Madame Maxine is nog steeds daar. Sy sit langs Hagrid. Hulle praat saggies met mekaar. Snerp sit laer af by die tafel, langs professor McGonagall. Sy oë huiwer vir ’n oomblik op Harry toe Harry na hom kyk. Dit

is moeilik om sy gesigsuitdrukking te lees. Hy lyk net so suur en onplezierig soos altyd. Harry gaan voort om hom dop te hou lank nadat Snerp reeds weggekyk het.

Wat het Snerp op Dompeldorius se bevel gaan doen, daardie nag toe Woldemort teruggekeer het? En hoekom . . . *hoekom* . . . is Dompeldorius so seker dat Snerp regtig aan hul kant is? Hy was hul spioen, het Dompeldorius in die Peinssif gesê. Snerp het as spioen teen Woldemort opgetree, “iets waarvoor hy groot persoonlike risiko’s geloop het”. Is dit wat hy nou weer moet doen? Moes hy dalk met die Doodseters gaan kontak maak? Voorgee dat hy nie regtig na Dompeldorius se kant oorgeloopt het nie, dat hy, soos Woldemort, sy tyd afgewag het?

Harry se gedagtes word onderbreek toe professor Dompeldorius by die personeeltafel opstaan. Die Groot Saal, wat in elk geval baie minder raserig as gewoonlik tydens die Afskeidsfees is, word baie stil.

“Die einde,” sê Dompeldorius terwyl hy om hom na almal kyk, “van nog ’n jaar.”

Hy aarsel en sy oë val op die Hoesenproestafel. Selfs nog voor hy opgestaan het, was hul tafel al die stilste van almal en hulle het ook die hartseerste en bleekste gesigte van almal in die Saal.

“Daar is baie wat ek vanaand vir julle wil sê,” sê Dompeldorius, “maar eers moet ek praat oor die heengaan van ’n baie besondere persoon wat hier moes gesit het,” – hy beduie na die Hoesenproesers – “en die Fees saam met ons moes geniet het. Ek vra dat almal van julle opstaan en jul glase lig ter gedagtenis aan Cedric Diggory.”

Almal van hulle maak so; die stoele skraap soos almal in die Saal opstaan, hul bekere lig en in een harde, lae, rammelende stem eggo, “Cedric Diggory.”

Harry kry ’n glimp van Cho deur die skare. Die trane loop geluidloos oor haar gesig. Toe almal weer gaan sit het, kyk hy af na die tafel.

“Cedric was ’n persoon waarin baie van die eienskappe wat Huis Hoesenproes onderskei, saamgevat was,” gaan Dompeldorius voort. “Hy was ’n goeie en lojale vriend, ’n harde werker, hy was gesteld op skoon spel. Sy dood het op almal van julle ’n uitwerking, of julle hom goed geken het of nie. Ek dink dus dat julle die reg het om te weet presies wat gebeur het.”

Harry lig sy kop en staar na Dompeldorius.

“Cedric Diggory is deur die Heer Woldemort vermoor.”

Paniekbevange fluisterings ruis deur die Groot Saal. Mense staar in ongeloof en afgryse na Dompeldorius. Hy lyk egter heeltemal bedaard terwyl hy wag dat almal moet stil word.

“Die Ministerie vir Towerkuns,” gaan Dompeldorius voort, “wil nie hê dat ek dit vir julle vertel nie. Dit is moontlik dat party van julle ouers geskok sal wees omdat ek dit doen – óf omdat hulle nie glo dat die Heer

Woldemort terug is nie, óf omdat hulle reken dat ek julle nie moet vertel nie omdat julle te jonk is. Ek is egter daarvan oortuig dat die waarheid verkieslik is bo leuens en dat enige poging om voor te gee dat Cedric as gevolg van 'n ongeluk dood is, of deur 'n soort flater wat hy begaan het, 'n belediging vir sy nagedagtenis is."

Nou is feitlik elke geskokte en verskrikte gesig in die Saal op Dompeldorius gerig . . . of feitlik elke gesig. Aan die oorkant by die Slibberintafel sien Harry hoe Draco Malfoy iets vir Krabbe en Goliat fluister. Harry voel 'n warm, siek opswelling van woede in sy maag. Hy dwing homself om na Dompeldorius te kyk.

"Daar is iemand anders wat ook in verband met Cedric Diggory se dood genoem moet word," gaan Dompeldorius voort. "Ek praat natuurlik van Harry Potter."

'n Soort rimpeling beweeg deur die Groot Saal soos 'n hele paar koppe na Harry draai voor hulle weer na Dompeldorius kyk.

"Harry Potter het daarin geslaag om van die Heer Woldemort te ontsnap," sê Dompeldorius. "Hy het sy lewe gewaag om Cedric se liggaam terug Hogwarts toe te bring. Hy het op elke moontlike manier bewys gelever van 'n onverskrokkenheid wat min towenaars wat al teen die Heer Woldemort te staan gekom het hom sou kon nadoen. Hiervoor vereer ek hom."

Dompeldorius draai plegtig na Harry en lig sy beker nog 'n keer. Feitlik almal in die Groot Saal volg sy voorbeeld. Hulle prewel sy naam net soos hulle met Cedric s'n gemaak het en drink op hom. Deur 'n gaping in die staande figure sien Harry egter dat Malfoy, Krabbe en Goliat en nog 'n hele klomp Slibberins uitdagend bly sit en nie aan hul bekere raak nie. Dompeldorius, wat na alles nie 'n magiese oog het nie, sien hulle nie.

Toe almal weer eens hul sitplekke ingeneem het, gaan Dompeldorius voort, "Die doel van die Drietowenaarstoernooi was om magiese bande te bevorder en uit te brei. In die lig van wat gebeur het – die Heer Woldemort se terugkoms – sal sulke bande belangriker as ooit tevore wees."

Dompeldorius kyk van Madame Maxine en Hagrid na Fleur Delacour en haar medestudente van Beauxbatons, na Viktor Krum en die Durmstrangers by die Slibberintafel. Harry sien dat Krum behoedsaam lyk, amper skrikkerig, asof hy verwag dat Dompeldorius iets kwaais gaan sê.

"Elke gas in hierdie Saal," sê Dompeldorius en sy oë huiwer op die Durmstrang-studente, "sal enige tyd met oop arms by ons ontvang word indien hulle hierheen wil kom. Ek sê weer eens vir almal van julle – in die lig van die Heer Woldemort se terugkoms – ons is net so sterk as wat ons saamstaan, so swak as wat ons verdeel is.

"Die Heer Woldemort se gawe om onmin en vyandskap te saai, is baie groot. Ons kan dit net beveg deur aan 'n ewe groot band van vriendskap

en vertrouwe te werk. Verskille in gewoontes en in taal is niks as ons doelstellings ooreenstem en ons harte oop is nie.

“Ek glo – en ek het nog nooit so hard gehoop dat ek verkeerd is nie – dat ons almal moeilike en donker tye ingaan. Sommige van julle hier in die Saal het alreeds onder Woldemort deurgeloop. Baie van julle se families is uitmekaargeskeur. ’n Week gelede is ’n student uit ons midde geskeur.

“Onthou vir Cedric. Onthou, as die tyd kom wanneer jy moet kies tussen dit wat reg en dit wat maklik is, onthou wat met ’n seun gebeur het wat goed en bedagsaam en dapper was, maar wie se pad met die Heer Woldemort s’n gekruis het. Onthou vir Cedric Diggory.”

Harry se trommel is gepak; Hedwig is terug in haar kou op die trommel. Hy, Ron en Hermien wag in die stampvol Ingangsportaal saam met die res van die vierdejaars op die koetse wat hulle na die Hogsmeade-stasie moet neem. Dit is ’n pragtige somerdag. Harry is seker dat wanneer hy later die aand daar opdaag, Ligusterlaan warm en groen sal wees, die blombeddings vol helder kleure. Die gedagte is geen plesier nie.

“Arry!”

Hy kyk om. Fleur Delacour kom haastig met die kliptrappe op na die kasteel aangedraf. Agter haar, ver oor die terrein, sien Harry hoe Hagrid vir Madame Maxine help om twee van die reuseperde in hul harnasse te kry. Die Beauxbatons-koets is op die punt om te vertrek.

“Ons sal mekaar weer sien, hoop ek,” sê Fleur toe sy by hom kom en haar hand uitsteek. “Ek hoop om ’n werkjie hier te kry om my Engels te verbeter.”

“Dis klaar baie goed,” sê Ron in ’n gewurgde soort stem. Fleur glimlag vir hom en Hermien trek skewebek.

“Tot siens, ’Arry,” sê Fleur toe sy omdraai om te gaan. “Dit was ’n plesier om vir jou te leer ken!”

Harry kan nie anders nie as om beter te voel toe hy kyk hoe Fleur oor die grasperk na Madame Maxine hardloop sodat haar silwer hare in die son agter haar wapper.

“Wonder hoe die Durmstrang-studente teruggaan?” sê Ron. “Dink julle hulle kan daardie skip sonder Karkaroff stuur?”

“Karkaroff het nie gestuur nie,” sê ’n growwe stem. “Hy’t in sy kajuit gebly en ons al die vherk laat doen.” Krum het Hermien kom groet. “Kan ek gou met jou praat?” vra hy vir haar.

“O . . . ja . . . goed,” sê Hermien en sy lyk ietwat gejaag toe sy Krum deur die skare volg en uit sig verdwyn.

“Jy moet gou maak!” skree Ron hard agter haar aan. “Die koetse sal enige oomblik hier wees!”

Hy sorg dat Harry vir die koetse uitkyk en vir die volgende paar mi-

nute rek hy sy nek om oor die skare te probeer sien wat Krum en Hermien in die mou voer. Hulle kom redelik gou terug. Ron staan na Hermien, maar haar gesig is uitdrukkingloos.

“Ek het van Diggory gehou,” sê Krum kortaf vir Harry. “Hy vhas altyd beleef teenoor my. Altyd. Al kom ek van Durmstrang – saam met Karakoff,” voeg hy smalend by.

“Het julle al ’n nuwe skoolhoof?” vra Harry.

Krum haal sy skouers op. Net soos Fleur steek hy sy hand uit en skud Harry se hand en daarna ook Ron s’n.

Ron lyk asof hy ’n pynlike innerlike tweestryd voer. Krum het reeds begin wegstap toe Ron uitbars, “Kan ek jou handtekening kry?”

Hermien draai glimlaggend na die perdlose koetse wat nou in die ry-pad opgerammel kom terwyl Krum, wat verbaas maar ook in sy skik lyk, ’n stuk perkament vir Ron teken.

Tydens die rit terug King’s Cross-stasie toe kan die weer nie meer verskil van hoe dit die vorige September op pad Hogwarts toe was nie. Daar is nie ’n enkele wolk in die lug nie. Harry, Ron en Hermien kry dit reg om alleen in ’n kompartement te sit. Pigwidgeon is weer eens onder Ron se aandkleed weggesteek om te keer dat hy die hele tyd hoe-hoe. Hedwig sit en dut met haar kop onder haar vlerk en Kromskeen is opgekrul op ’n ekstra sitplek waar hy soos ’n groot, wollige gemmerkussing lyk. Terwyl die trein suidwaarts snel, gesels Harry, Ron en Hermien meer openlik en lekkerder as die hele vorige week. Dit voel vir Harry asof Dompeldorius se toespraak aan die einde van die Afskeidsfees ’n soort prop uitgetrek het. Dit is nou heelwat minder pynlik om oor alles wat gebeur het te praat. Hulle onderbreek hul gesprek oor wat Dompeldorius alles kan doen om Woldemort te stuit eers toe die middagetetrollie aankom.

Toe Hermien van die trollie af terugkom en haar geld in haar skooltas sit, val ’n eksemplaar van die *Daaglikse Profeet* wat sy daarin gehou het uit.

Harry kyk daarna. Hy is nie seker of hy regtig wil weet wat daarin staan nie, maar toe Hermien sien hoe hy daarna kyk, sê sy bedaad, “Daar’s niks in nie. Jy kan self kyk, maar daar’s hoegenaamd niks. Ek kyk nog elke dag. Net ’n klein stukkie die dag na die derde taak om te sê dat jy die Toernooi gewen het. Hulle het nie eens vir Cedric genoem nie. Hoegenaamd niks oor enigiets anders nie. As jy my vra, het Broddelwerk hulle gedwing om hul monde te hou.”

“Hy sal nooit vir Rika stilkry nie,” sê Harry. “Nie met so ’n storie nie.”

“O, Rika het sedert die derde taak nog niks geskryf nie,” sê Hermien in ’n vreemde stem. “Om die waarheid te sê,” voeg sy by en nou bewe haar stem so effens, “Rika Skinner gaan vir ’n hele rukkie niks skryf nie. Behalwe as sy wil hê dat ek met die hele mandjie patats oor haar vorendag moet kom.”

“Waarvan praat jy?” vra Ron.

“Ek het uitgevind hoe sy dit regkry om na privaat gesprekke te luister hoewel sy nie op die terrein mag kom nie,” sê Hermien vinnig.

Harry kry die indruk dat Hermien al dae lank brand om dit vir hulle te vertel, maar dat sy haarself ingehou het in die lig van alles wat gebeur het.

“Hoe het sy dit gedoen?” vra Harry dadelik.

“Hoe het jy uitgevind?” vra Ron terwyl hy na haar staar.

“Wel, eintlik was dit jy wat my die idee gegee het, Harry,” sê sy.

“Ek?” sê Harry verward. “Hoe?”

“Bugs,” sê Hermien in haar noppies.

“Maar jy’t gesê dit sal nie werk nie –”

“O, nie elektroniese bugs nie,” sê Hermien. “Nee, jy sien . . . Rika Skinner” – nou bewe Hermien se stem van onderdrukte triomf – “is ’n onge-registreerde Animagus. Sy verander –”

Hermien haal ’n klein verseëelde glasflessie uit haar tas.

“– in ’n kewer.”

“Dit jok jy,” sê Ron. “Jy het nie . . . sy is nie . . .”

“O ja, sy is,” sê Hermien tevrede terwyl sy die flessie voor hulle hou.

Binne-in is ’n paar takkies en blare en ’n groot, vet kewer.

“Dit is nie – dit lieg jy –” fluister Ron toe hy die flessie voor sy oë hou.

“Nee, ek lieg nie,” sê Hermien stralend. “Ek het haar in die siekeboek op die vensterbank gevang. Kyk van naderby, dan sal jy sien dat die merke om haar antennes net soos daardie vieslike bril van haar lyk.”

Harry kyk en sien dat sy reg is. Hy onthou ook iets. “Daar was ’n gogga op die standbeeld die nag toe ons gehoor het hoe Hagrid vir Madame Maxine van sy ma vertel!”

“Presies,” sê Hermien. “En Viktor het ’n kewer uit my hare gehaal toe ons daar langs die meer gesels het. En tensy ek my vergis, was Rika op die vensterbank by die Waarsêery-klas die dag toe jou litteken seer was. Sy het die hele jaar oral agter stories aan gegons.”

“Toe ons Malfoy onder daardie boom gesien het . . .” sê Ron stadig.

“Het hy met haar gepraat, in sy hand,” sê Hermien. “Hy’t natuurlik geweet. Dis hoe sy al daardie lekker onderhoude met die Slibberins gekry het. Hulle sal nie omgee as dit onwettig is nie, solank hulle net allerhande aaklige goed oor ons en Hagrid kan sê.”

Hermien vat die glasfles by Ron en glimlag vir die kewer wat ergerlik teen die glas gons.

“Ek het vir haar gesê ek sal haar uitlaat sodra ons in Londen aankom,” sê Hermien. “Ek het ’n Onbreekbare-towerspreuk op die fles gesit, sien, sodat sy nie kan transformeer nie. En ek het vir haar gesê dat sy haar veerpen vir ’n jaar moet stilhou. Wil kyk of sy die gewoonte om aaklige leuens oor mense te skryf, kan breek.”

Hermien glimlag sedig en sit die kewer terug in haar skooltas.

Die kompartement se deur gly oop.

“Baie slim, La Grange,” sê Draco Malfoy.

Krabbe en Goliat staan agter hom. Al drie van hulle lyk meer in hul skik met hulself, meer arrogant en meer dreigend as wat Harry hulle nog ooit sien lyk het.

“So,” sê Malfoy stadig terwyl hy ’n entjie by die kompartement instap. ’n Skewe laggie speel om sy lippe. “Jy het ’n patetiese verslaggewertjie gevang en Potter is weer Dompeldorius se witbroodjie. Briljant.”

Sy grynsag word breër. Krabbe en Goliat lag honend.

“Probeer om nie daaraan te dink nie, hè?” sê Malfoy sag terwyl hy na die driestuks kyk. “Probeer voorgee dat niks gebeur het nie?”

“Trap,” sê Harry.

Hy was nog nie naby Malfoy sedert hy gesien het hoe Malfoy tydens Dompeldorius se toespraak oor Cedric met Krabbe en Goliat gepraat het nie. Hy voel hoe sy ore tuit. Hy hou sy towerstaf styf onder sy kleed vas.

“Jy het die verloorkant gekies, Potter! Ek het jou gewaarsku! Ek het vir jou gesê dat jy jou vriende beter moet kies, onthou? Daar op die trein, die eerste dag by Hogwarts? Ek het vir jou gesê jy moenie met gemors soos hulle meng nie!” Hy ruk sy kop na Ron en Hermien toe. “Nou’s dit te laat, Potter! Hulle sal die eerstes wees wat waai noudat die Donker Heer terug is! Modderbloeders en Moggelliefhebbers eerste! Wel – tweede – Diggory was eers –”

Dis asof iemand ’n boks vuurwerke in die kompartement aan die brand steek. Verblind deur towerspreuke wat uit alle rigtings kom, verdoof deur ’n reeks knalle, knip Harry sy oë en kyk af vloer toe.

Malfoy, Krabbe en Goliat lê bewusteloos in die deur. Hy, Ron en Hermien het opgespring, elkeen van hulle drie het ’n ander vloek gebruik. Hulle is ook nie die enigstes wat dit gedoen het nie.

“Gedink ons sal kom kyk wat daardie drie hier aanvang,” sê Fred saaklik terwyl hy op Goliat trap toe hy die kompartement binnestap. Sy towerstaf is gereed vir aksie en so ook George s’n, wat ook seker maak dat hy op Malfoy trap toe hy Fred na binne volg.

“Interessante effek,” sê George en hy kyk na Krabbe. “Wie het die Pitseervloek gebruik?”

“Ek,” sê Harry.

“Snaaks,” sê George vrolik. “Ek het Jelliebene gevat. Dit lyk my die twee moenie gemeng word nie. Kyk die tentakels wat oral op sy gesig groei. Wel, ons kan hulle nie hier los nie, hulle dra nie juis by tot die binneversiering nie.”

Ron, Harry en George skop, rol en stoot die bewustelose Malfoy, Krabbe en Goliat – wat al drie goed sleg lyk na die deurmekaarspul vloeke wat hulle getref het – tot in die gang, kom dan terug na die kompartement en stoot die deur toe.

“Ontplofkaart, iemand?” sê Fred toe hy ’n pak kaarte uithaal.

Hulle is halfpad deur hul vyfde pot toe Harry besluit om hulle te vra.

“Gaan julle nou vir ons sê,” vra hy vir George, “wie julle afgepers het?”

“O,” sê George onheilspellend. “Dit.”

“Dit maak nie saak nie,” sê Fred en hy skud sy kop ongeduldig. “Dis nie belangrik nie. In elk geval, nie nou meer nie.”

“Ons het dit laat vaar,” sê George skouerophalend.

Harry, Ron en Hermien hou egter aan met vra en uiteindelik sê Fred, “Goed, goed, as julle dan regtig moet weet . . . dit was Ludo Bagman.”

“Bagman?” sê Harry skerp. “Wil jy vir my sê dat Bagman betrokke is by –”

“Naa,” sê George stug. “Niks van so ’n aard nie. Simpele ou bok. Asof hy die verstand het.”

“Wel, wat dan?” vra Ron.

Fred aarsel en dan sê hy, “Onthou julle daardie weddenskap wat ons met hom gehad het, daar by die Kwiddiek-Wêreldbeker? Oor hoe Ierland sal wen, maar dat Krum die Snip sal kry?”

“Ja,” sê Harry en Ron stadig.

“Wel, die ou bok het ons met aardmannetjiegoud betaal wat hy by die Ierse gelukbringers afgeneem het.”

“En?”

“En,” sê Fred ongeduldig, “dit het verdwyn, nè? Die volgende oggend was dit weg!”

“Maar – dit was darem seker ’n ongeluk, hè?” sê Hermien.

George uiter ’n bitter laggie. “Ja, dis wat ons ook aan die begin gedink het. Ons het gedink as ons vir hom skryf en vir hom sê dat hy ’n fout gemaak het, sal hy hoes. Maar moenie glo nie. Het ons brief bloot geïgnoreer. Ons het by Hogwarts met hom daaroor probeer praat, maar hy’t die hele tyd verskonings gemaak en van ons probeer wegkom.”

“Op die ou end het hy jollie gemeen geraak,” sê Fred. “Vir ons gesê ons is te jonk om te dobbel en dat hy niks vir ons gaan gee nie.”

“Toe vra ons ons geld terug,” sê George.

“Hy’t darem seker nie geweier nie!” sê Hermien en sy snak na asem.

“Heeltemal korrek,” sê Fred.

“Maar dit was al julle spaargoud!” sê Ron.

“Weet ek dit nie,” sê George. “Ons het natuurlik later uitgevind wat aangaan. Lee Jordaan se pa het ook gesukkel om sy goud uit Bagman te kry. Kom toe uit dat hy lelik in die sop by die gnome is. Het tonne goud by hulle geleen. ’n Bende van hulle het hom na die Wêreldbeker in die woud trompop geloop en al die goud wat hy op hom gehad het, afgevat, maar dit was nie genoeg om al sy skuld te betaal nie. Toe’s hulle die hele ent pad Hogwarts toe agter hom aan om ’n ogie oor hom te hou. Hy’t alles

met dobbel verloor. Het nie twee Galjoene op sy naam nie. En weet julle hoe het die swaap probeer om die gnome terug te betaal?"

"Hoe?" sê Harry.

"Hy't 'n weddenskap op jou aangegaan, my ou," sê Fred. "Gewed dat jy die Toernooi sal wen. Teen die gnome."

"So *dis* hoekom hy probeer het om my te help wen!" sê Harry. "Wel – ek het gewen, nè? Nou kan hy mos vir julle jul goud gee!"

"Nee," sê George en hy skud sy kop. "Die gnome het net so vuil soos hy gespeel. Hulle't gesê jy was gelykop met Diggory en Bagman het gewed dat jy alleen gaan wen. Toe moet Bagman maak dat hy wegkom. Hy't homself net na die derde taak uit die voete gemaak."

George sug diep en begin om weer kaarte uit te deel.

Die res van die rit verloop baie plesierig. Om die waarheid te sê, Harry wens dit kan die hele somervakansie so aanhou en dat hulle nooit by King's Cross-stasie gaan aankom nie . . . maar soos hy hierdie jaar op die moeilike manier geleer het, gaan die tyd nie stadiger verby net omdat iets onplesierigs op jou wag nie, en alte gou begin die Hogwarts Express by platform nege-en-'n-driekwart stadiger loop. Die gewone verwarring en geraas vul die gange terwyl die studente begin afklim. Ron en Hermien sleepdra hul trommels verby Malfoy, Krabbe en Goliat.

Harry bly egter agter. "Fred – George – wag 'n bietjie."

Die tweeling draai om. Harry maak sy trommel oop en haal sy Drietoewenaarsprysgoud uit.

"Vat dit," sê hy en druk die sak in George se hande.

"Wat?" sê Fred en hy lyk uit die veld geslaan.

"Vat dit," herhaal Harry beslis. "Ek wil dit nie hê nie."

"Jy's van jou kop af," sê George en hy probeer om dit terug na Harry toe te stoot.

"Nee, ek is nie," sê Harry. "Vat julle dit en begin goeters uitvind. Dis vir die grapwinkel."

"Hy is mal," sê Fred met iets soos ontsag in sy stem.

"Luister," sê Harry beslis. "As julle dit nie vat nie, gaan ek dit in die drein gooi. Ek wil dit nie hê nie en ek het dit ook nie nodig nie. Maar 'n paar grappe sal my goeddoen. Ons het almal 'n paar grappe nodig. Ek het 'n gevoel dat ons dit kort voor lank baie nodiger as gewoonlik sal hê."

"Harry," sê George floutjies terwyl hy die geldsak in sy hande weeg, "daar's ten minste 'n duisend Galjoene hierin."

"Ja," sê Harry met 'n grinnik. "Dink net hoeveel Kanarieroompies is dit."

Die tweeling gaap hom aan.

"Moet net nie vir jul ma sê waar julle daaraan gekom het nie . . . Hoewel, noudat ek daaroor dink, sy's dalk ook nie meer so gretig dat julle by die Ministerie moet gaan werk nie . . ."

“Harry,” begin Fred, maar Harry trek sy towerstaf uit.

“Kyk,” sê hy bot, “vat dit of ek toor julle. Ek ken nou nogal 'n paar goeies. Doen my net een guns, oukei? Koop vir Ron 'n ander aandkleed en sê dat dit van julle af kom.”

Voor hulle nog 'n woord kan sê, stap hy by die kompartement uit en klim oor Malfoy, Krabbe en Goliat wat nog steeds vol toormerke op die vloer lê.

Oom Vernon staan net buite die versperring en wag. Mev. Weasley staan ook daar naby. Toe sy Harry sien, druk sy hom styf teen haar vas en fluister in sy oor, “Ek dink Dompeldorius sal jou later in die vakansie na ons toe laat kom. Mooi loop, Harry.”

“Sien jou, Harry,” sê Ron toe hy hom op die rug slaan.

“Tata, Harry!” sê Hermien en toe doen sy iets wat sy nog nooit tevore gedoen het nie. Sy soen hom op die wang.

“Harry – dankie,” mompel George terwyl Fred koorsig langs hom staan en knik.

Harry knipoog vir hulle, draai na oom Vernon en stap sonder 'n woord agter hom aan en uit by die stasie. Dit gaan nie help om hom te bekommer nie, sê hy vir homself toe hy agterin die Dursleys se motor klim.

Soos Hagrid gesê het, wat moet gebeur, gaan gebeur . . . en hy sal dit maar net moet hanteer.